

# **Guidelines for Spiritual Assemblies on Domestic Violence:**

## ***A Supplement to Developing Distinctive Bahá'í Communities***

Compiled by National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States Office of Assembly Development.  
Evanston, IL: US NSA, 2002

O SON OF SPIRIT!

**T**he best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice; turn not away therefrom if thou desirest Me, and neglect it not that I may confide in thee. By its aid thou shalt see with thine own eyes and not through the eyes of others, and shalt know of thine own knowledge and not through the knowledge of thy neighbor. Ponder this in thy heart; how it behooveth thee to be. Verily justice is My gift to thee and the sign of My loving-kindness. Set it then before thine eyes.

*~ Bahá'u'lláh*

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## Preface

(with Notes on Terminology)

This manual, *Guidelines for Spiritual Assemblies on Domestic Violence: A Supplement to Developing Distinctive Bahá'í Communities*,<sup>[1]</sup> has been developed by the National Spiritual Assembly<sup>[2]</sup> for the purpose of providing informed, consistent, and explicit guidance to Local Spiritual Assemblies<sup>[3]</sup> concerning domestic violence. It is designed as a tool to familiarize Local Spiritual Assemblies with the many forms of domestic violence, to eliminate misconceptions about it, and to assist Local Spiritual Assemblies in their functioning, through:

- Establishing the spiritual basis for addressing domestic violence in the context of Bahá'í beliefs;
- Making available a common set of definitions, consistent with field research, for what constitutes domestic violence;
- Providing insight into the relationship between gender inequality and domestic violence;
- Clarifying the general role of laws, punishment and education as they relate to dealing with situations of domestic violence;
- Identifying Bahá'í laws, principles, and exhortations that apply directly to situations of domestic violence;
- Contrasting and clarifying the roles of individuals and of Local Spiritual Assemblies in relation to domestic violence;
- Identifying the responsibilities of Local Spiritual Assemblies under both civil<sup>[4]</sup> and Bahá'í law to protect those who are abused, to discipline those who commit abuse, and to foster and support the spiritual transformation and character development of every soul; and
- Providing a basis for educating the Bahá'í community about domestic violence.

Although the scope of this supplement is intended primarily to provide advice about a broad range of behaviors that may occur between family members or within the home, much of its guidance applies also to situations of abuse or violence that occur between unrelated individuals. Issues of Bahá'í marriage and divorce may also be involved in situations of domestic violence, but they are not addressed in this supplement, as *Developing Distinctive Bahá'í Communities* and other Bahá'í publications offer guidance on those matters.

Although this supplement is intended primarily as a reference tool for use when a Local Spiritual Assembly is confronted with a situation of domestic violence, it is recommended that all Assemblies thoroughly familiarize themselves with its contents prior to the necessity of handling such situations. To deal wisely with the complex and sensitive issues of domestic violence requires intimate familiarity with its various aspects, as outlined above. Given that the supplement is written in such a way that each section builds upon previous sections, familiarity is best gained by reading the document sequentially and in its entirety. Further assistance in studying this document and learning to apply the guidance contained within can be found in the Assembly Development Module Workshop *Advanced Practice in Administering Justice: Focus on Domestic Violence*, which can be obtained from the Bahá'í Distribution Service.<sup>[5]</sup>

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1 *Developing Distinctive Bahá'í Communities: Guidelines for Spiritual Assemblies* is a manual designed to aid Local Spiritual Assemblies in applying the principles of Bahá'í administration with wisdom and love to the various issues which may come before them.

2 A National Spiritual Assembly is the nine-member governing council of a national Bahá'í community, elected annually by the national membership. There is no clergy in the Bahá'í Faith. Further information on the Bahá'í Faith or its administrative system is available at <http://www.us.bahai.org> and from the Bahá'í Distribution Service (refer to the [Bahá'í Resources and References on Related Topics](#) section).

3 A Local Spiritual Assembly is the locally elected nine-member governing council of a local Bahá'í community that forms a part of the Bahá'í administrative system.

4 The term “civil law” is used throughout the supplement to include federal, state, and local laws, except in instances where the text distinguishes civil from criminal law.

5 Refer to the [Bahá'í Resources and References on Related Topics](#) section.



Together with the rest of society, the Bahá'í community is engaged in an on-going learning process regarding the subject of domestic violence and this supplement should be regarded as a “work in progress.” As our understanding increases and we receive input from the community, additional guidance from the Universal House of Justice,<sup>[6]</sup> and further research from the field, we will continue to make revisions and look forward to receiving comments and suggestions.

Moreover, as domestic violence is a global pandemic, affecting people of every culture, religion, race, ethnicity, economic strata and educational background, Local Spiritual Assemblies and Bahá'í communities are encouraged to form partnerships and to cooperate with other organizations to eradicate domestic violence from the life of the community and the nation.

In addition to the wealth of guidance in the Bahá'í teachings applying to situations of domestic violence, we wish to acknowledge that such a thorough treatment of the subject would not have been possible without the contributions and sacrifices of the multitude of individuals and organizations who are carrying forward programs of research, prevention, intervention, legislation, and remediation, often impelled by courageous individuals who have spoken out about abuse, by stories of those who have suffered the consequences and by aware individuals seeking to change society for the benefit of present and future generations. In particular, we wish to acknowledge our appreciation for the extensive cumulative body of materials made available by many such organizations and individuals as contributions to society's collective understanding of the dynamics of domestic violence, which were invaluable in preparing some sections of this document. Finally, we would like to express our heartfelt appreciation to the dozens of individuals from a broad range of backgrounds whose generous contributions of expertise, experience, insight, advice, review and feedback were essential to our work.

It is with humility and gratitude that we offer *Guidelines for Spiritual Assemblies on Domestic Violence: A Supplement to Developing Distinctive Bahá'í Communities* for the use of the Bahá'í community and welcome its examination by others who are also seeking to free humanity from this pernicious and age-old social disorder.

Please note that the guidance in this supplement does not constitute legal advice, which should be sought from a qualified attorney if needed.

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## **NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY OF THE BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES**

### **Summary Policy Statement on Domestic Violence**

The National Spiritual Assembly wishes to convey a clear message that acts of domestic violence are at complete variance with the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and that violence in the family is a practice to be condemned. In addition, domestic violence is a criminal act in the United States. Such behaviors, on the part of either men or women, are rooted in longstanding social practices connected with an inability or

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6 The Universal House of Justice is the nine-member governing council of the Bahá'ís of the world, elected once every five years by all members of all National Spiritual Assemblies throughout the world.

unwillingness to apply the fundamental spiritual principle of the equality of women and men and to recognize the fundamental right of every human being to be treated with consideration and respect.

For the purposes of the work of the Bahá'í community, domestic violence should be understood broadly to include all forms of violence or abuse among family members or within the home. It encompasses behaviors in which one person uses coercion, intimidation, threats or violence to control the behavior of another. These behaviors usually escalate over time and may include verbal, physical, sexual, emotional, and economic abuses, as well as neglect, property damage, terrorizing, corrupting, and stalking. In addition to the spiritual consequences for one who commits such acts, the above behaviors are violations of Bahá'í standards of conduct and may result in loss of Bahá'í administrative rights. Many of these behaviors are also violations of state and federal law and may result in civil or criminal penalties.

In the Bahá'í administrative system, Local Spiritual Assemblies have primary responsibility for addressing situations of domestic violence. It is the National Spiritual Assembly's policy to actively support Local Assemblies in developing their capacity to recognize and effectively address domestic violence situations for the purpose of eradicating such deplorable behaviors from the life of the Bahá'í community. The National Spiritual Assembly's strategies include providing all Local Assemblies with detailed written guidance, as well as offering training and case-by-case assistance. Such written guidance and training materials are made widely available for use by Bahá'í communities and by Bahá'í institutions, schools and organizations at all levels. As in other cases of violation of Bahá'í law, the sanction of removing an offender's Bahá'í administrative rights may be applied by the National Spiritual Assembly.

Recognizing that the functions of Local Assemblies and of various social service agencies and civil authorities are different and complementary, the National Spiritual Assembly encourages Local Assemblies to rely upon law enforcement and social service intervention in domestic violence situations, both for the immediate protection of individuals and for longer term needs. Local Assemblies are also responsible for assisting members of their communities to abide by Bahá'í standards of conduct, and they are encouraged to recommend to individuals the assistance of appropriate social services and counselors for this purpose. Therapeutic treatment is encouraged for both offenders and victims of domestic violence, as a valuable component of healing and personal spiritual transformation.

In contrast to obvious and extreme forms of domestic violence, the less extreme and non-criminal aspects of domestic violence present the challenge that they may not even be recognized as abusive. Yet they also are violations of Bahá'í standards of conduct, and they affect a broad segment of the population. Overcoming and preventing all forms of domestic violence requires that local Bahá'í communities foster a spirit and active pattern of loving support for families and emphasize both personal and family development in on-going education programs for children, youth and adults. The National Spiritual Assembly promotes such education at the local and regional levels through sponsoring schools, developing curricula, and training teachers and facilitators. The Bahá'í community aims to create models of marriage and family life that are founded on respect, equality, justice and unity and are conducive to the full human and spiritual development of every individual.

*The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States*

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# **GUIDELINES FOR SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLIES ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**

## **A Supplement to *Developing Distinctive Bahá'í Communities***

*[Note: Throughout this supplement, quotations from the Bahá'í Writings and statements from Shoghi Effendi, the Universal House of Justice and the Bahá'í International Community are displayed in Times New Roman font, while guidance and commentary from the National Spiritual Assembly are displayed in Arial font.]*

### **Addressing Domestic Violence in the Context of Bahá'í Beliefs**

The light of men is Justice. Quench it not with the contrary winds of oppression and tyranny.  
The purpose of justice is the appearance of unity among men.

*~ Bahá'u'lláh*

### **Unity and Justice Are Pivotal Principles**

The pivotal principle of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings is the essential unity and interrelationship of all humanity. This principle has profound implications for the life of the world, reaching deeply into the requisites, exigencies and purpose of justice. Unity based on justice has the power to create peace in every realm of human affairs.

Yet, the lamps of the light of justice are veiled and darkened in the presence of inequality, whether it stems from national, ethnic, racial, religious, gender or other prejudice. Inequality, founded on a prejudicial sense of superiority or privilege over others, appears in its most extreme forms as oppression and tyranny. At the national and international levels, oppression and tyranny lead to revolutions, wars, and crimes against humanity. At the family level, oppression and tyranny appear as abuse or domestic violence.<sup>[1]</sup>

For the lamps of justice to shine brightly in the realm of family and social relationships, the veils of all forms of prejudicial inequality must be removed. Domestic violence, whether committed by men or women, is a form of social injustice that can best be overcome by promoting gender equality, with its profound implications for family relationships, childrearing, and the complementary advancement of women and men, in the context of all other Bahá'í beliefs.

### **Promote Social Justice and Gender Equality**

In response to the alarming incidence of domestic violence in the United States and in accordance with its responsibility to promote social justice, the National Spiritual Assembly is intensifying its efforts to increase awareness in the Bahá'í community of the importance of gender equality and the devastating impact on families and society of failure to act on this principle. The objectives of the National Assembly are to promote full recognition and acceptance of the principle of gender equality and foster the development of ever more refined models of behavior in keeping with Bahá'í standards of conduct.

Without gender equality, unity is a chimera. The immediate challenges facing society and the Bahá'í community in this regard are two-fold: The foremost challenge is to recognize and accept that, in spite of legal guarantees, gender equality is not yet a reality in American society or in the Bahá'í community, and that fundamental changes in attitudes and behavior must take place in individuals and families for social justice to be achieved. The secondary, and possibly more difficult, challenge is to know how to apply the principle of gender equality in daily life in the absence of established behavioral models.

It is the National Assembly's firm conviction that the full attainment of gender equality, as it affects the basic behavioral development of every man, woman, youth, and child, is linked to the elimination of all forms of prejudice. Therefore, an increased emphasis on gender equality does not diminish efforts in the Bahá'í community to promote freedom from other prejudices, particularly America's most challenging

issue, racial prejudice. On the contrary, all efforts to eliminate prejudices and to promote gender equality are necessarily complementary and mutually reinforcing. Oppression and tyranny can only be fully overcome by a commitment to justice that protects every human being.

## **Domestic Violence at Complete Variance with Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh**

The National Spiritual Assembly wishes to convey to the Bahá'í community a clear message that acts of domestic violence are at complete variance with the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and that violence in the family is a practice to be condemned. In addition, domestic violence is a criminal act in the United States. Such behaviors, on the part of either men or women, are rooted in longstanding social practices connected with an inability or unwillingness to apply the fundamental spiritual principle of the equality of women and men, and to recognize the fundamental right of every human being to be treated with consideration and respect.

## **On Protecting Reputation of Faith**

While some may think that reporting domestic violence in the Bahá'í community to public officials and others damages the reputation of the Faith, the National Assembly takes the view that concealing it does greater harm by undermining the fundamental principles of justice on which the Faith is based and depriving the community of the assurance of protection from misconduct. It believes that the reputation of the Faith is best served by demonstrating, both within and without the Bahá'í community, an unswerving adherence to the principles of social justice so clearly enshrined in the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh.

## **Obey Civil Laws**

The principle of obedience to government carries an implicit responsibility for Bahá'ís to be informed of civil laws<sup>[2]</sup> that may affect how they live their lives and carry out their responsibilities within the community. As defined by the federal Violence Against Women Act (VAWA)<sup>[3]</sup>, domestic violence is a crime throughout the United States, but laws regarding reporting, confidentiality, and other aspects vary from state to state, and sometimes even from locality to locality. The National Assembly does not attempt to advise Local Spiritual Assemblies on these specifics, but it expects Assemblies to be informed about them and both Assemblies and individual Bahá'ís to obey them.

## **Encourage Civil Intervention**

The National Assembly encourages Local Spiritual Assemblies to research and identify resources available in their area and to incorporate strong institutional support for programs of civil or criminal intervention in domestic violence. Such intervention, together with effective offender treatment programs, has been shown to curb violence and protect the abused, as well as help offenders improve their behavior. Tolerating, ignoring or denying domestic violence is a grave disservice not only to the abused but to the Bahá'í community and society at large, as well as to the offender, who must not be allowed to continue violating Bahá'í and civil law.

## **Uphold Inherent Nobility of Human Soul**

Any endeavor by Bahá'í institutions to address the problem of domestic violence in the Bahá'í community must empower communities to develop models of family life that integrate the principle of equality between males and females and that provide safe places for both to undertake the challenge of developing wholesome interpersonal relationships. It is also vital that safe environments be created for both those who have been or are being abused<sup>[4]</sup> and those who engage in abusive behaviors<sup>[5]</sup> where

each is welcomed and aided to address the problem in a manner that upholds the inherent nobility of the human soul and that fully protects confidentiality within the limits of the law.

### **Foster Spirit of Loving Support for Families**

The National Assembly wishes to convey to the Bahá'í community that acts of domestic violence are betrayals of trust and threats to the existence of the family unit. Neglecting to address issues of abuse within families invites further abuse and obstructs the development of more spiritualized patterns of behavior. As families constitute the bedrock of human society, it is the policy of the National Assembly to foster and encourage a spirit of loving support to families in general and to those struggling to overcome patterns of domestic violence in particular.

### **Promote Bahá'í Standards of Conduct**

A significant and long-standing goal of the National Assembly is the promotion of education among children, youth, and adults, integrating personal transformation and character development in accord with Bahá'í standards of conduct.

### **Encourage Therapeutic Treatment**

In addition to well-developed educational strategies for the development of good character, the National Assembly encourages programs aimed at prevention and healing, and the use of therapeutic treatment programs for both offenders and victims of domestic violence and other forms of trauma, as valuable components of personal spiritual transformation.

## **Definition of Domestic Violence**

### **Domestic Violence Is Pattern of Controlling Behaviors**

Domestic violence is a pattern of behaviors, described below, used among family members or within the home by one person to oppress, dominate, and control another person or persons. Abuse occurs among people from every socioeconomic, racial, educational, cultural, and religious background. It may occur between partners in a relationship, married or not married, living together, separated or dating. It may also occur between siblings, between a parent and a child or children, between an adult child and an elderly parent, or between other relatives. Sociological research indicates that in the absence of remedial action, abusive behaviors that do not directly incorporate physical violence may lead to it and that such behaviors usually grow worse over time.

### **Domestic Violence Occurs in Cycles**

Domestic violence occurs in characteristically predictable cycles with the following general pattern:

- Tension-building, which may include criticism, yelling, angry gestures, swearing, coercion, and/or “looks”
- Violence, which may include one or more of the following: threats, throwing or breaking things, and physical, verbal, or sexual attacks, as well as economic abuse or deprivation
- Manipulative seduction or “honeymooning,” which may include blaming others for the abuse, apologies, gifts, expressions of remorse and promises to change, leading only to a repetition of the cycle

When an Assembly consults with individuals involved in domestic violence, it should be aware of the cycle of domestic violence and how this cycle might affect what is reported. It should understand that an apparent improvement in relations may be expected to follow an outburst of violence and that all parties may confirm it and express hope or confidence that the improvement will be maintained. However, without intervention, the cycle will almost inevitably continue and grow worse over time, even though months or even years may pass between episodes.

### **Individuals May Be Unaware of Varied Aspects of Domestic Violence**

Individual Bahá'ís may be unaware that particular behaviors in the family, which may be perceived as rightful forms of discipline, constitute violations of Bahá'í or civil law. Those from other countries may be particularly unaware of United States federal and state laws concerning domestic violence.

### **Individual Patterns of Abuse Are Likely to Have Multiple Characteristics**

As the patterns of behavior constituting domestic violence are often embedded at an unconscious level of presumed acceptability, both culturally and experientially, it may be helpful to enumerate in detail a range of the behaviors that are characteristically seen in domestic violence in the United States. Several of these behaviors may characterize the pattern of a particular individual and may vary widely in the degree of severity to which they are acted out. While intended to assist Bahá'í communities to have a more consistent understanding of domestic violence, it should be borne in mind that the following list is not exhaustive:

- Physical abuse, which is non-accidental physical injury resulting from such actions as shaking, hair pulling, slapping, hitting, shoving, blocking, kicking, choking, inflicting burns, stabbing, or other acts causing physical harm, even of an apparently insignificant nature, or endangerment, such as abandoning in an unsafe place.
- Sexual abuse, which ranges from harassment (unwelcome sexual attention, including, but not limited to, sexually suggestive “looks,” innuendoes, language, touching, coercion to dress in uncomfortable ways, and/or unwanted exposure to pornographic or sexually suggestive material) to outright sexual molestation, assault, rape, incest, or forcible or uninformed involvement in the creation of pornography. Such behaviors in relation to children are especially abhorrent. They are as reprehensible in a marital relationship as in any other relationship.
- Economic abuse, which may include but is not limited to, fraud or coercion in financial affairs, withholding money or preventing the abused party from getting or holding a job, opening a bank account, pursuing an education, obtaining routine or specialized medical care, or from obtaining assistance from a relative, friend or social service agency.
- Destroying or damaging property, or threatening to do so. This may include, but is not limited to, throwing things, breaking, burning or defacing things, punching holes in doors or walls, hoarding trash and prohibiting the abused individual from disposing of it, and creating dirt, disorder and filth in the living environment.
- Neglect, which involves failing to meet the reasonable needs of a dependent, such as an underage child, a disabled family member, or an elderly parent. Neglect often incorporates aspects of other kinds of abuse.
- Abandonment or desertion, which occurs most devastatingly to children, immigrants and the elderly.
- Emotional and verbal abuse, which is a repetitive pattern of behavior denigrating the abused party's sense of self worth, such as name-calling, belittling and sarcastic comments that continually “beat down” self-esteem. It may also include humiliating, rejecting, or ignoring the abused party in private or in public.
  - For children, this may occur in a repeated pattern of caregiver behavior or extreme incidents that

convey to children that they are worthless, flawed, unloved, unwanted, endangered, or only of value in meeting another's needs.

- For adults, this may be a relationship where the offender continuously degrades or belittles the abused or accuses them of being stupid, unattractive, a bad parent, unfaithful or any other similar fault and can be considered an indicator of domestic violence or the potential for domestic violence.
- Corrupting is a special category of abuse most often involving children or youth that involves teaching them that “right is wrong and wrong is right,” such that they are unable to distinguish the difference or to have normal social relationships, and may be particularly relevant in cases involving sexual abuse.
- Stalking, or persistent unwelcome attention. Stalking generally refers to repeated harassing or threatening behavior, such as following a victim, appearing uninvited at a victim's home or place of business, making harassing phone calls, leaving written messages or objects, or vandalizing a victim's property. These actions may or may not be accompanied by a credible threat of serious harm.
- Using coercion and threats to intimidate or terrorize and control the behavior of the abused party. This may include threats of abduction or loss of custody of children, injury to family members or to pets and, in cases of immigrants, may include threats of deportation.
- Isolating the abused party from family, friends or social contacts. This may evolve into a pattern of self-isolation on the part of the abused party to appease the offender, out of shame or out of a growing inability to relate to people with more normal lives.
- Minimizing or denying to the abused party or to others the impact or existence of abuse.
- Blaming the abused party for causing the abuse or of being responsible for the behavior, personality or character of the abuser.

## **Abusive Behaviors Should Be Recognized as Unacceptable Regardless of Gender**

While women are sometimes the perpetrators of violent abuse, field research shows that the preponderating share of domestic violence involving serious injury or loss of life is committed by men against women<sup>[6]</sup> and children<sup>[7]</sup>. Less extreme forms of abuse, which are generally not reported and may not even be identified as abuse, may be committed as frequently by women as by men and contribute to the widespread acceptance and perpetuation of abusive patterns in society. However, whether committed by men or women, Bahá'ís should recognize all such behaviors as unacceptable on the basis of spiritual principle (in addition to many of them being violations of criminal law) and should strive diligently in the process of personal transformation to recognize and overcome any such behaviors and attitudes.

## **Criminality and Penalties Determined by Circumstance and Jurisdiction**

Which aspects of domestic violence are considered crimes depend upon the particular circumstances, as well as the laws of the state in which the act occurs. In addition to physical violence, direct or indirect threats of violence that cause a reasonable person to believe that she or he is in danger may be crimes. Certain acts of domestic violence, whether or not subject to criminal punishment, may be grounds for restrictions on personal conduct, such as court orders of protection or restraint to prevent offenders having contact with the abused. Certain acts may be grounds for civil suits filed by the abused or their families for award of monetary damages.

In a growing number of communities and states, domestic violence is now prosecuted as a crime without the requirement for the abused party to file a complaint and even without their assistance or cooperation. This method is increasingly recognized as helpful in prosecuting criminal cases so they may proceed without being impeded or adversely affected by the cyclical nature of relationships between offenders

and abused individuals or by the presence of intimidation. Assemblies faced with domestic violence situations may find it helpful to be informed of the approach used in their area.

## **Early Intervention Is Protective Measure**

Although verbal, emotional, psychological, and economic abuses, with some exceptions, are not generally considered criminal behaviors, they are widely regarded as forms of domestic violence. Non-criminal abusive behaviors are destructive to family relationships, sometimes become the basis of civil suits or court injunctions and, if unchecked, may lead to criminal abuse. Violations of civil court injunctions may incur criminal penalties. Understanding the relationship between non-criminal domestic violence and criminal domestic violence is helpful in promoting early intervention as a protective measure for present and future victims, as well as for the offender, who risks increasingly punitive penalties as his or her behavior grows worse. Tolerance of relatively insignificant or “minor” forms of abuse, with the mindset that it isn't “really” domestic violence because it doesn't result in significant physical injury, almost inevitably invites increasingly serious expressions of abuse in the present relationship and probably in future relationships.

## **Harmful Effects of Abusive Behavior Are Well-Established**

Domestic violence instills and perpetuates harmful patterns of behavior and distorts development of human character through the force of wrongful example. It obstructs appropriate spiritual, emotional and psychological development, particularly in children and youth who are witnesses or victims of domestic violence. 'Abdu'l-Bahá admonishes:

It is not, however, permissible to strike a child, or vilify him, for the child's character will be totally perverted if he be subjected to blows or verbal abuse.

*('Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 125)*

Abuse has been implicated in numerous studies as a causal factor for both adults and children in a diverse range of mental, emotional, and physical ills. Further, according to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, abusive misconduct limits the spiritual development of the abuser as, “every aggressor deprives himself of God's grace.”<sup>[8]</sup>

It is important to note that the Universal House of Justice has made a distinction between behavior that may be identified as abusive and that which may be a legitimate aspect of discipline for children, understood to be a responsibility of parents. However, any such disciplinary actions are to be carried out “'gently and patiently' and with 'loving care.'”<sup>[9]</sup>

As to your question about the use of physical punishment in child training, although there is a Tablet of the Master's which considers beating as not permissible, this does not necessarily include every form of corporal punishment. In order to have a full grasp of the Master's attitude towards punishment, one has to study all His Tablets in this respect. For the time being no hard and fast rule can be laid down, and parents must use their own wise discretion in these matters until the time is ripe for the principles of Bahá'í education of children to be more clearly elucidated and applied.

*(Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated August 12, 1975, to an individual believer)*

## **Important to Know Signs of Abusive Behavior**

Violence takes many forms and can happen frequently or once in a while. It is important to be able to recognize abusive behaviors for what they are in order to prevent or stop violence.



## Important to Know Indicators of Imminent Danger

It is also important to know the indicators of imminent danger. There are a number of lethality indicators now commonly used in law enforcement to gauge the dangerousness of an abuser in a domestic violence crisis situation:

- Threat of or use of a weapon, including fire or explosives
- Threat or fantasies of suicide or homicide
- History of violence or law enforcement interventions
- Obsession or extreme jealousy
- “Ownership,” idolization of, or over-dependence on abused party
- Public acts of abuse or other increase of risky behavior, including violation of a protective order
- Actual or impending separation of parties or other perceived loss of control
- Depression or mental illness
- Use of alcohol or drugs
- Stalking
- Abuse of pets or other animals

In some jurisdictions, the presence of any two of the above may be cause for arrest during a crisis situation. In addition, a sudden increase in the frequency or intensity of physically violent incidents is understood in the field of domestic violence research to be an indicator of imminent lethal danger. There may be periods when abusers present no danger and others when they are acutely dangerous; therefore, a cautionary note is that the intuition of the abused, rather than professional assessment or the factors set forth above, may be the best guide to knowing when there is danger.<sup>[10]</sup> Assemblies should be careful to take seriously and encourage the abused party to believe in their own intuitive assessment of the situation and take necessary steps for protection.

The dangerous potential of the above behaviors should not be minimized by assuming that Bahá'ís in general or that any particular individual would be too spiritually evolved to commit a criminal act.

## Important to Know Most Dangerous Times

For women in dangerous home environments, leaving does not mean that she and her children are safe. Repeated field research studies indicate that the most dangerous times are when she is leaving and after she has left, with up to 75% of domestic assaults being inflicted after separation.<sup>[11], [12]</sup> Pregnancy is also an especially vulnerable time for women, with field research indicating pregnancy as a time when abuse may first occur or escalate, often with assault directed towards the unborn child.<sup>[13]</sup> Despite the dangers of leaving, research data and experience of advocates for battered women demonstrate that “ultimately a battered woman can best achieve safety and freedom apart from the batterer.”<sup>[14]</sup>

## Why People Stay in Abusive Relationships

There are many reasons why people choose to stay in abusive relationships. The reasons may be complex and deeply rooted in private and cultural patterns or they may simply be that they know of no practical alternative. Any or all of the following may be factors:

- *Conflicted emotions:* Love for the abusive family member and the cyclical nature of abuse are frequently cited reasons for staying in a dangerous relationship. Improvement in relations after episodes of abuse supports the hope that, if the abused party is patient, things will change for the better.
- *Wanting to keep the family together:* Some people who are abused may hold strong cultural views or religious beliefs that marriages must be kept intact at all costs, regardless of circumstances.

Some may fear that disclosures of abuse would break up the family, or might even result in the abused person being ostracized from the family, if other members of the family do not believe the abuse is either real or significant enough to warrant revealing it. Some may believe that the experience of domestic violence is part of their fate or an inevitable part of marriage, and that they must endure the violence.

- *Shame and guilt:* Many people who are abused are ashamed of the abuse. In cultures where guilt is laid on the victim, they may be ashamed to seek help from family members and friends because they believe they have in some way provoked the violence or deserve the abuse. In some cultures, shame may mean disgrace and loss of respect not only for the person who is abused but also for the immediate family, the entire ancestral lineage, and even for future generations.
- *Fear of losing children:* Many perpetrators threaten to take children away, to harm them, or to prevent the victim from obtaining custody.
- *Fear of losing place in society:* In many cultures, marriage is viewed as the vehicle to achieve material and even spiritual security. Socialized to believe that they have no other options but to be wives and mothers, many abused women find it difficult to terminate abusive relationships.
- *Fear of retaliation:* People who are abused may believe, sometimes rightly, that leaving will place their own lives or the lives of others in danger.
- *Lack of economic resources:* Many people who are abused are financially dependent upon their abusers and do not have the resources to establish independence. This is particularly true of women with young children or several children, the elderly and the disabled.
- *Lack of affordable housing:* Shelters, public and subsidized housing and group homes often have long waiting lists. Shelters may require people to leave after a limited period of time. Other alternatives may not be available and, as a consequence, the most vulnerable people may find themselves homeless or constrained to return to the abuser.
- *Lack of familiarity with the legal/social system:* Many people who are abused do not understand the complexities of the legal system, such as how to obtain an order of protection or handle child custody issues. In addition, many are not aware of how to enlist the assistance of community resources such as mental health centers, shelters, and health clinics, or may not even be aware that they exist.
- *Lack of culturally sensitive services and resources:* Abused members of ethnic minorities often feel that the services available do not meet their needs and, therefore, do not view mainstream social service and domestic violence interventions as viable options.

Too often, responsibility for ending abuse is shifted to abused parties by blaming them for not leaving abusive relationships. It fails to hold abusers accountable for abusive behavior and avoids the obvious question, “Why doesn't the abuser choose to leave (even go for a walk) rather than choosing to abuse?”

## **Relationship of Gender Inequality to Domestic Violence**

### **Family Violence Is Global Problem**

Family violence is a global and pernicious problem ... [that] must be addressed by the world community. It is not a private matter, but has become a global pandemic that the international community can neither ignore nor allow to be protected within the privacy of the family. It is an affliction that ravages all regions of the world, all economic and educational strata and all types of families. The family is the primary locus of human socialization and development. If that development process is denied or distorted, the adverse consequences can be irreversible. Behaviors learned in the home are replicated in the wider society.

*(Bahá'í International Community, Creating Violence-Free Families, Summary Report of United Nations Symposium, May 1994)*

Compare the nations of the world to the members of a family. A family is a nation in miniature. Simply enlarge the circle of the household, and you have the nation. Enlarge the circle of nations, and you have all humanity. The conditions surrounding the family surround the nation. The happenings in the family are the happenings in the life of the nation.

*(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 157)*

## **Violence against Women Is Yardstick for Human Rights Violations**

Violence against women is a yardstick by which one can measure the violation of all human rights. It can be used to gauge the degree to which a society is governed by aggressivity, dominated by competition and ruled by force. Abusive practices against women have frequently been and are still being justified in the context of cultural norms, religious beliefs and unfounded “scientific theories” and assumptions. But whatever its political or religious system, a society patterned on dominance inevitably gives rise to such distortions of power as violence against women.

*(Bahá’í International Community, Ending Violence Against Women, Statement to 51st session of UN Commission on Human Rights, March 1995)*

## **Violence against Women Is Rooted in Traditional Gender Inequality**

The association between gender inequality and violence against women seems self-evident, given the considerably higher proportion of intimate partner violence committed by men against women, as revealed in decades of studies, some of which are referenced in the preceding section. When examining such violence, the following statement by the Universal House of Justice affirms the traditional nature of these behaviors throughout the world:

A number of your questions pertain to the treatment of women, and are best considered in light of the principle of equality of the sexes which is set forth in the Bahá’í Teachings. This principle is far more than the enunciation of admirable ideals; it has profound implications in all aspects of human relations and must be an integral element of Bahá’í domestic and community life. The application of this principle gives rise to changes in habits and practices which have prevailed for many centuries.

*(Letter written of behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, dated January 24, 1993)*

## **Gender Prejudices Distort Human Development and Foster Domestic Violence**

In every culture, deeply rooted, underlying assumptions and prejudices about gender distort development of both males and females and foster environments in which domestic violence can thrive. With this understanding, the above-cited research lends additional urgency to the National Spiritual Assembly's statement on gender equality:

The damaging effects of gender prejudice are a fault line beneath the foundation of our national life. The gains for women rest uneasily on unchanged, often unexamined, inherited assumptions. Much remains to be done. The achievement of full equality requires a new understanding of who we are, what is our purpose in life, and how we relate to one another — an understanding that will compel us to reshape our lives and thereby our society.

*(National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States, Two Wings of a Bird, 1997)*

## **Violence-Free Families Require Partnerships between Society and Men and Women**

Effective efforts to create violence-free families require a partnership between men and women and the active participation of all social sectors. Strategies for redress and remedies

must be designed to include the whole family, because the dynamics of family violence directly affect all its members.

*(Bahá'í International Community, Creating Violence-Free Families, Summary Report of United Nations Symposium, May 1994)*

## **Fostering Development of Both Men and Women Essential to Eradication of Domestic Violence**

That eradication of all forms of domestic violence is dependent upon elimination of gender prejudice can no longer be doubted. Fostering the development of boys and men in areas in which they have been historically underdeveloped, in addition to promoting the education and progress of girls and women, cannot be ignored as an essential component of a full and lasting resolution to the patterns of aggressiveness and dominance, which underlie not only domestic violence but all forms of human rights violations.

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. Hence the new age will be an age less masculine and more permeated with the feminine ideals ... an age in which the masculine and feminine elements of civilization will be more evenly balanced.

*(Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted by J.E. Esselmont in Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era, p. 156)*

## **Both Women and Men Must Be Strengthened in Deficient Areas**

The following analogy of the bird of humanity requiring two wings of equal strength to fly contains the implication that in addition to strengthening women in ways in which they have been deficient, men must, likewise, be strengthened in ways in which they have been traditionally deficient:

The world of humanity is possessed of two wings: the male and the female. So long as these two wings are not equivalent in strength, the bird will not fly. Until womankind reaches the same degree as man, until she enjoys the same arena of activity, extraordinary attainment for humanity will not be realized; humanity cannot wing its way to heights of real attainment.

*(Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 375)*

## **Mutual Strengthening Will Increase Capacity of Both to Reach Highest Potential**

This mutual strengthening will in no way diminish those inherent differences between the sexes which God has chosen to confer upon them, but will increase the capacity of both to reach their highest potential. This is confirmed by the following passages:

That men and women differ from one another in certain characteristics and functions is an inescapable fact of nature and makes possible their complementary roles in certain areas of the life of society; but it is significant that 'Abdu'l-Bahá has stated that in this Dispensation "*Equality of men and women, except in some negligible instances, has been fully and categorically announced.*"

*(The Universal House of Justice, Introduction, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p. 7)*

When the two wings . . . become equivalent in strength, enjoying the same prerogatives, the flight of man will be exceedingly lofty and extraordinary.

*(Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 375)*

## **Examination of Attitudes, Feelings and Behavior Is Needed**

Among the conclusions of the National Spiritual Assembly concerning men in its statement on gender equality is the following, which has particular applicability to considerations of domestic violence:

It is essential that men engage in a careful, deliberate examination of attitudes, feelings, and behavior deeply rooted in cultural habit, that block the equal participation of women and stifle the growth of men.

*(National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, Two Wings of a Bird, 1997)*

Again applying the principle of equality evenly, women are not exempt from self-examination in the area of gender equality and must also engage in deliberate examination of their own attitudes, feelings and behaviors, which may contribute to sustaining traditional patterns of gender prejudice.

## **Recognition of Mutual Roles Does Not Diminish Obligation to Cease Violence**

Recognizing that women and men have important roles in identifying and changing cultural assumptions and prejudices, as well as their own attitudes and behaviors associated with those assumptions, in no way diminishes the immediate obligations of both to cease any violent or threatening behaviors and to behave in spiritually responsible and law-abiding ways.

## **Role of Laws, Punishment, and Education in Relation to Domestic Violence**

### **Continuance of Mankind Depends upon Justice**

As forgiveness is one of the attributes of the Merciful One, so also justice is one of the attributes of the Lord. The tent of existence is upheld upon the pillar of justice and not upon forgiveness. The continuance of mankind depends upon justice and not upon forgiveness.

*(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 270)*

### **American Bahá’ís Called to Uphold Justice**

Small wonder, therefore, that the Author of the Bahá’í Revelation should have chosen to associate the name and title of that House<sup>[15]</sup>, which is to be the crowning glory of His administrative institutions, not with forgiveness but with justice, to have made justice the only basis and the permanent foundation of His Most Great Peace, and to have proclaimed it in His Hidden Words as “the best beloved of all things” in His sight. It is to the American believers, particularly, that I feel urged to direct this fervent plea to ponder in their hearts the implications of this moral rectitude, and to uphold, with heart and soul and uncompromisingly, both individually and collectively, this sublime standard - a standard of which justice is so essential and potent an element.

*(Shoghi Effendi, The Advent of Divine Justice, pp. 28-29)*

### **Some Bahá’ís Do Not Conform Actions to Standards of Teachings**

Membership in the Bahá’í community is open to all who accept Bahá’u’lláh as the Manifestation of God, and who thereupon embark on the process of changing their conduct and refining their character. It is inevitable that this community will, at times, be subject to delinquent behaviour of members whose actions do not conform to the standards of the Teachings.

*(Letter written of behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, dated January 24, 1993)*

## **Violation of Spiritual Laws Injures Not Only Individuals but Also Society**

Just as there are laws governing our physical lives, requiring that we must supply our bodies with certain foods, maintain them within a certain range of temperatures, and so forth, if we wish to avoid physical disabilities, so also there are laws governing our spiritual lives. These laws are revealed to mankind in each age by the Manifestation of God, and obedience to them is of vital importance if each human being, and mankind in general, is to develop properly and harmoniously. Moreover, these various aspects are interdependent. If an individual violates the spiritual laws for his own development he will cause injury not only to himself but to the society in which he lives. Similarly, the condition of society has a direct effect on the individuals who must live within it.

*(The Universal House of Justice, Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1968-1973, pp. 105-6)*

## **Domestic Violence May Be Violation of Both Civil and Bahá'í Laws**

Individuals who commit acts of domestic violence may be subject to civil, criminal and Bahá'í administrative sanctions. While the Bahá'í community must protect itself against the misconduct of a small minority of its members, its true goal is to illumine the minds and refine the behavior of all its members to such a degree that none would commit an illegal act and all would shrink from the very thought of harming anyone.

## **Law Must Punish Crime for Protection of Society**

The Laws of God are not imposition of will, or of power, or pleasure, but the resolutions of truth, reason and justice.'

All men are equal before the law, which must reign absolutely.

The object of punishment is not vengeance, but the prevention of crime ... the law must punish him in order to prevent a repetition of that same crime by others, as the pain of the individual is unimportant beside the general welfare of the people.

*(Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, p. 154)*

The law must act first for the protection of society. Then, it may take into account the condition of the offender and undertake a program of healing and rehabilitation. Sadly, people who are mentally unstable sometimes commit criminal acts. In every such case, the duly constituted institutions of society bear the burden of determining the balance of protective, rehabilitative and therapeutic measures to be applied.

## **Punishment Not Revenge but Imposition of Penalty for Committed Offense**

In His Tablets 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains the difference between revenge and punishment. He affirms that individuals do not have the right to take revenge, that revenge is despised in the eyes of God, and that the motive for punishment is not vengeance, but the imposition of a penalty for the committed offence. In *Some Answered Questions*, He confirms that it is the right of society to impose punishments on criminals for the purpose of protecting its members and defending its existence.

*(The Universal House of Justice, Notes, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p. 203)*

## **Strive Day and Night to Accomplish Education That Crimes May Not Occur**

The community...ought day and night to strive and endeavor with the utmost zeal and effort to accomplish the education of men, to cause them day by day to progress and to increase in

science and knowledge, to acquire virtues, to gain good morals and to avoid vices, so that crimes may not occur.

*(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 271)*

## **Ultimate Solution Not Punishment but Spiritual Illumination**

It should be recognized that the ultimate solution to the problems of humanity lies not in penalties and punishments, but rather in spiritual education and illumination. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has written:

It is incumbent upon human society to expend all its forces on the education of the people, and to copiously water men's hearts with the sacred streams that pour down from the Realm of the All-Merciful, and to teach them the manners of Heaven and spiritual ways of life, until every member of the community of man will be schooled, refined, and exalted to such a degree of perfection that the very committing of a shameful act will seem in itself the direst infliction and most agonizing of punishments, and man will fly in terror and seek refuge in his God from the very idea of crime, as something far harsher and more grievous than the punishment assigned to it.

It is toward this goal that the community of the Greatest Name is striving, aided and reinforced by the limitless power of the Holy Spirit.

*(Letter written of behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, dated January 24, 1993)*

## **Bahá’í Community Must Offer World a Model**

As humanity passes through the age of transition in its evolution to a world civilization which will be illumined by spiritual values and will be distinguished by its justice and its unity, the role of the Bahá’í community is clear: it must accomplish a spiritual transformation of its members, and must offer to the world a model of the society destined to come into being through the power of the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh.

*(Letter written of behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, dated January 24, 1993)*

## **Bahá’í Laws, Principles, and Exhortations Applying to Domestic Violence**

### **Obedience to Civil Law Sacred Obligation of Every True Bahá’í**

At the outset it should be made indubitably clear that the Bahá’í Cause being essentially a religious movement of a spiritual character stands above every political party or group, and thus cannot and should not act in contravention to the principles, laws, and doctrines of any government. Obedience to the regulations and orders of the state is, indeed, the sacred obligation of every true and loyal Bahá’í.

*(Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, dated February 11, 1934)*

### **Bahá’ís Must Exemplify Freedom from All Forms of Abuse**

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. 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. They must be ever mindful of their obligation to exemplify a

new way of life distinguished by its respect for the dignity and rights of all people, by its exalted moral tone, and by its freedom from oppression and from all forms of abuse.

*(Letter written of behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, dated January 24, 1993)*

## **All Acts of Violence Are Condemned**

In another connection He, wishing to stress His strong condemnation of all acts of violence, had written: “*It would be more acceptable in My sight for a person to harm one of My own sons or relatives rather than inflict injury upon any soul.*”

*(Bahá'u'lláh, quoted by Shoghi Effendi in God Passes By, pp. 133-34)*

## **Use of Force or Threat of Violence Is Flagrant Transgression of Bahá'í Teachings**

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. 'Abdu'l-Bahá has written, “O ye lovers of God! In this, the cycle of Almighty God, violence and force, constraint and oppression, are one and all condemned.” 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 behavior by the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh.

*(Letter written of behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, dated January 24, 1993)*

## **No Abuse of Any Kind, Whether Emotional, Mental or Physical**

The stress laid in the statements of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá on love and harmony as the hallmark of marriage, and in view of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's exhortation that each member of the family must uphold the rights of the others, makes it clear that violence in the family is contrary to the spirit of the Faith and a practice to be condemned. It is clear that no husband should subject his wife to abuse of any kind, whether emotional, mental or physical. Such a reprehensible action would be the very antithesis of the relationship of mutual respect and equality enjoined by the Bahá'í writings—a relationship governed by the principles of consultation and devoid of the use of any form of abuse, including force, to compel obedience to one's will.

*(Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Australia, dated April 12, 1990)*

## **No One Should Be Subjected to Tyranny**

From the pen of Bahá'u'lláh Himself has come the following statement on the subject of the treatment of women:

The friends of God must be adorned with the ornament of justice, equity, kindness and love. As they do not allow themselves to be the object of cruelty and transgression, in like manner they should not allow such tyranny to visit the handmaidens of God. He, verily, speaketh the truth and commandeth that which benefiteth His servants and handmaidens. He is the Protector of all in this world and the next.

No Bahá'í husband should ever beat his wife, or subject her to any form of cruel treatment;



to do so would be an unacceptable abuse of the marriage relationship and contrary to the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh.

*(Letter written of behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, dated January 24, 1993)*

### **Lift Not the Hand of Injustice and Oppression**

Let none contend with another, and let no soul slay another; this, verily, is that which was forbidden you in a Book that hath lain concealed within the Tabernacle of glory. What! Would ye kill him whom God hath quickened, whom He hath endowed with spirit through a breath from Him? Grievous then would be your trespass before His throne! Fear God, and lift not the hand of injustice and oppression to destroy what He hath Himself raised up; nay, walk ye in the way of God, the True One.

*(Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p. 46)*

### **Lack of Spiritual Values Leads to Debasing of Attitudes Governing Relationships**

The lack of spiritual values in society leads to a debasing of the attitudes which should govern the relationship between the sexes, with women being treated as no more than objects for sexual gratification and being denied the respect and courtesy to which all human beings are entitled. Bahá'u'lláh has warned: “They that follow their lusts and corrupt inclinations, have erred and dissipated their efforts. They, indeed, are of the lost.”<sup>[16]</sup> Believers might well ponder the exalted standard of conduct to which they are encouraged to aspire.

*(Letter written of behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, dated January 24, 1993)*

### **Abuse of Children Is Betrayal of Trust and Denial of Human Rights**

While the 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.

*(Letter written of behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, dated January 24, 1993)*

### **Child's Character Perverted by Blows or Verbal Abuse**

Let the mothers consider that whatever concerneth the education of children is of the first importance. Let them put forth every effort in this regard, for when the bough is green and tender it will grow in whatever way ye train it. Therefore is it incumbent upon the mothers to rear their little ones even as a gardener tendeth his young plants. Let them strive by day and by night to establish within their children faith and certitude, the fear of God, the love of the Beloved of the worlds, and all good qualities and traits. Whensoever a mother seeth that her child hath done well, let her praise and applaud him and cheer his heart; and 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. It is not, however, permissible to strike a child, or vilify him, for the child's character will be totally perverted if he be subjected to blows or verbal abuse.

*(Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 125)*

*(See also “Harmful Effects of Abusive Behavior Are Well-Established” in the Definition of Domestic Violence section.)*

## **Sexual Abuse of Children Is Most Debased Form of Human Conduct**

### **Children Must Be Protected**

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. At a time in the fortunes of humanity when, in the words of the Guardian, “The perversion of human nature, the degradation of human conduct, the corruption and dissolution of human institutions, reveal themselves ... in their worst and most revolting aspects,” and when “the voice of human conscience is stilled,” when “the sense of decency and shame is obscured,” the 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. 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 behavior, and to promote healing and therapy.

*(Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, dated January 24, 1993)*

## **Curbing Aggression within Families Is Matter of Fundamental Importance**

If the broad structure of society is to remain intact, 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. This is a matter of fundamental importance, for if the friends are not able to maintain harmony within their families, on what other basis do they hope to demonstrate to a sceptical world the efficacy of the preminent character of the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh? What possible influence could they hope to exert on the development of nations and the establishment of world peace?

*(Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, dated September 22, 1983)*

## **To Be Treated with Consideration and Respect Is Intrinsic Human Right**

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 remold 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.

*(Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, dated January 24, 1993)*

## **Bahá’í Men Have Opportunity to Demonstrate New Approach**

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. The Universal House of Justice has pointed out in response to questions addressed to it that, in a marriage relationship, neither husband nor wife should ever unjustly dominate the other, and that there are times when the husband and the wife should defer to the wishes of the other, if agreement cannot be reached through consultation; each couple should determine exactly under what circumstances such deference is to take place.

*(Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, dated January 24, 1993)*

## **Contrast between Role of Individual and Role of Assembly**

### **Differentiate Role of Spiritual Assembly from That of Individuals**

There is a tendency to mix up the functions of the Administration and try to apply it in individual relationships, which is abortive, because the Assembly is a nascent House of Justice and is supposed to administer, according to the Teachings, the affairs of the community. But individuals toward each other are governed by love, unity, forgiveness and a sin-covering eye. Once the friends grasp this they will get along much better, but they keep playing Spiritual Assembly to each other and expect the Assembly to behave like an individual. ...

*(Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, dated October 5, 1950)*

### **Assembly Has Duty to Administer Law of God with Justice**

In the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláh prohibits sexual immorality and in the Annex to that Book states that the various degrees of sexual offences and the punishments for them are to be decided by the Universal House of Justice. In this connection it should be realized that there is a distinction drawn in the Faith between the attitudes which should characterize individuals in their relationship to other people, namely, loving kindness, forbearance, and concern with one's own sins, not the sins of others, and those attitudes which should be shown by the Spiritual Assembly, whose duty is to administer the law of God with justice.

*(The Universal House of Justice, Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1968-1973, pp. 105-6)*

### **Individuals Should Be Forgiving but Have No Right to Excuse Crime**

Although individuals are admonished to forgive one another on a personal level, this does not imply a right on the part of one individual to excuse another from the consequences of serious misconduct or criminal behavior. Judgment in such matters, whether involving violation of Bahá'í laws or violation of civil laws, can only be provided by duly constituted institutions.

If a person commit a crime against you, you have not the right to forgive him; but the law must punish him in order to prevent a repetition of that same crime by others, as the pain of the individual is unimportant beside the general welfare of the people.

*(Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, p. 154)*

... But if criminals were entirely forgiven, the order of the world would be upset. So punishment is one of the essential necessities for the safety of communities, but he who is oppressed by a transgressor has not the right to take vengeance. On the contrary, he should forgive and pardon, for this is worthy of the world of man.

*(Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 268)*

While individuals are enjoined to be forgiving and forbearing, Assemblies, parents, and other responsible parties cannot afford to be naïve, foolish, or anything less than continually vigilant with regard to the protection and safety of vulnerable members of the community entrusted to their care.

### **Understanding Distinction Is Pivotal to Effective Community Functioning**

A clear understanding of the distinctions between the role of the individual and the role of the Spiritual Assembly by all members of the community is pivotal to the effective functioning of the community. The tenor of the relationship between an Assembly and the members of its community and the quality of community life are largely determined by how well these respective roles are understood and carried out. In a successful community, the Assembly will recognize and resolutely carry out its duties, no matter

how challenging, strengthened by its confidence in the support and cooperation of its community, and the members of the community will have confidence in the ability of the Assembly to protect and guide it.

## **Role of Individual**

### **General Considerations**

#### **Obey Civil and Bahá'í Laws**

The cardinal principle which we must follow ... is obedience to the government prevailing in any land in which we reside ...

*(Shoghi Effendi, Directives of the Guardian, p. 57)*

Individual Bahá'ís are admonished to be aware of and obey both Bahá'í laws and the civil laws of the jurisdiction in which they reside. (Refer to “Obey Civil Laws” in Addressing Domestic Violence in the Context of Bahá'í Beliefs and to Chapter 15 in *Developing Distinctive Bahá'í Communities: Guidelines for Spiritual Assemblies*).

#### **Defend Self and Protect Others from Harm**

As responsible members of the community, individuals should turn to civil authorities for protection but also have a duty to defend themselves and to protect others from harm.

Man has not the right to take vengeance, but the community has the right to punish the criminal. ... This punishment is for the protection of man's rights, but it is not vengeance; vengeance appeases the anger of the heart by opposing one evil to another. ... Thus when Christ said: “Whosoever shall smite thee on the right cheek, turn to him the left one also,” [footnote in original: Matt. 5:39] it was for the purpose of teaching men not to take personal revenge. He did not mean that, if a wolf should fall upon a flock of sheep and wish to destroy it, the wolf should be encouraged to do so. No, if Christ had known that a wolf had entered the fold and was about to destroy the sheep, most certainly He would have prevented it. ... Then what Christ meant by forgiveness and pardon is not that, when nations attack you, burn your homes, plunder your goods, assault your wives, children and relatives, and violate your honor, you should be submissive in the presence of these tyrannical foes and allow them to perform all their cruelties and oppressions.

*(Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, pp. 268-71)*

A hitherto untranslated Tablet from 'Abdu'l-Bahá points out that in the case of attack by robbers and highwaymen, a Bahá'í should not surrender himself, but should try, as far as circumstances permit, to defend himself, and later on lodge a complaint with the government authorities. A statement in a letter written on behalf of the Guardian indicates that in an emergency when there is no legal force at hand to appeal to a Bahá'í is justified in defending his life.

*(Letter from the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Honduras, dated March 20, 1972)*

We have, however, advised the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States that under the present circumstances in that country it is preferable that Bahá'ís do not buy nor own arms for their protection or the protection of their families.

*(The Universal House of Justice, Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1968-1973, p. 26)*

Individual Bahá'ís, including Assembly members, are strongly encouraged to seek any protections available under civil law, particularly in matters pertaining to personal safety. Although, in some cases, reporting domestic violence to civil authorities or Bahá'í institutions may in itself seem threatening, neglecting to do so could have serious consequences.

## **Avoid Gossip and Backbiting**

Whatever steps are taken, it is vital that the believers refrain from gossip and backbiting, for this can only harm the Faith, causing perhaps more damage than would have been caused by the original offense.

*(Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, dated February 20, 1977)*

While gossip and backbiting are explicitly prohibited by Bahá'u'lláh, taking a problem to a Bahá'í institution, to a relevant civil or social service agency, therapist, or counselor to seek assistance with the problem is not viewed as gossip or backbiting.

## **Turn to Local Spiritual Assembly**

A Bahá'í who is directly involved in a situation of domestic violence should consider turning to his or her Local Spiritual Assembly for assistance.

When a Bahá'í wife finds herself in such a situation [of domestic violence] and feels it cannot be resolved through consultation with her husband, she could well turn to the Local Spiritual Assembly for advice and guidance ...

*(Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Australia, dated April 12, 1990)*

He feels that you should turn to your Local Assembly, in the strictest confidence, and seek their aid and advice. These bodies have the sacred obligation to help, advise, protect, and guide the believers in every way within their power when appealed to - indeed they were established just for the purpose of keeping order and unity and obedience to the law of God amongst the believers.

You should go to them as a child would to its parents...

*(Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, dated September 28, 1941)*

## **When to Turn to National Spiritual Assembly or Auxiliary Board**

In matters of domestic violence, if individuals feel they cannot turn to their Local Spiritual Assembly for any reason, they should not hesitate to turn to the National Spiritual Assembly, as advised by the Universal House of Justice:

Often with cases of domestic violence, individuals do not take their problems to the Assembly for a number of reasons. They may be embarrassed to do so as it will indicate that they have been violated as a human being; they feel it might bring shame to their families; they are frightened if they do, domestic violence will be even more severe; or they may feel that the Assembly is not competent in dealing with this problem of theirs. There may be other reasons. If individuals feel that they cannot tell their Local Assembly, they should go to the National Spiritual Assembly. Such a situation may arise if, for example, one of the parties to the conflict is serving on the Local Spiritual Assembly.

*(Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Australia, dated April 12, 1990)*

Individuals are also free to seek advice from Auxiliary Board members or assistants:

In general, it is not the task of Auxiliary Board members, but rather that of the Spiritual Assemblies, to deal with the personal problems of individuals and conflicts between them and with disciplinary matters. However, the Auxiliary Board members and their assistants are vital elements of the Bahá'í Administrative Order, with functions which include the counseling of believers. If a believer approaches an Auxiliary Board member or an assistant with a personal matter, it is for the Board member or assistant to decide whether to give advice or ask the believer to turn to the Spiritual Assembly.

*(The Universal House of Justice, The Institution of the Counselors, p. 24)*

Individuals who are fortunate enough to recognize for themselves that they have abusive behavior patterns may also turn to any of these resources and seek assistance in overcoming attitudes and behaviors not in keeping with Bahá'í standards of conduct.

## **Cooperate Fully with Spiritual Assembly When Asked to Provide Information**

Believers called upon to provide information should, if necessary, be reminded of the responsibility they bear to speak the truth and of the spiritual consequences of a failure to do so. 'Abdu'l-Bahá asserts:

Truthfulness is the foundation of all human virtues. Without truthfulness, progress and success, in all the worlds of God, are impossible for any soul. When this holy attribute is established in man, all the divine qualities will also be acquired.<sup>[17]</sup>

If this “holy attribute” should adorn the behavior of believers toward others, how much more should it characterize statements which a Bahá'í makes to a divinely ordained institution.

The prospect of a believer's displaying an attitude of hostility, when being interviewed by a Spiritual Assembly or its representatives who are seeking to determine the facts of a matter, is abhorrent. All believers are strongly enjoined to have the utmost respect for the Assemblies, to cooperate fully with them, and to support their decisions.

*(Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, dated December 24, 1991)*

## **Wholeheartedly Uphold Decisions of Spiritual Assembly**

The eyes of the people of the world are beginning to be focused on us; and, as humanity's plight goes from bad to worse, we will be watched ever more intently by non-Bahá'ís, to see whether we do uphold our own institutions wholeheartedly; whether we are the people of the new creation or not; whether we live up to our beliefs, principles and laws in deed as well as word. We cannot be too careful. We cannot be too exemplary.

*(Shoghi Effendi, Unfolding Destiny, p. 350)*

## **Seek Assistance of Professional Counselors**

Help should be sought from professional counselors whose services may be obtained through domestic violence hotlines, social services, and battered women's shelters,<sup>[18]</sup> as well as conventional therapists for emotional and psychological recovery and support.

The Universal House of Justice also notes that a person in this situation [domestic violence] 'might ... find it highly advantageous to seek the assistance of competent professional counselors.'

*(Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Australia, dated April 12, 1990)*

Not all counselors understand domestic violence. The abused party should feel comfortable with and trust the counselor. If that is not the case, or if the abused party feels blamed by the counselor, she or he should not hesitate to seek counseling elsewhere. This advice for victims of domestic violence is distinct from that for offenders who frequently deny their responsibility for abusive behavior and must often be mandated by the court to attend counseling.

Regarding your question about methods of healing which involve temporarily re-experiencing or remembering events, these are complex medical matters and as stipulated in the Teachings, believers should seek the best medical advice which is available and follow it. Experience seems to suggest that the healing process can often be a lengthy and stressful one requiring the close guidance and help of trained professionals. Advice given by well-

meaning believers to the effect that you should seek to transcend psychological problems does not qualify as competent advice on what is essentially a medical issue.

*(Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, dated October 23, 1994)*

Family members are generally not qualified to treat other family members in such matters. Psychological and emotional injuries are as real and as serious as physical injuries and are deserving of competent treatment. People sometimes seek to avoid counseling due to a perception of stigma and concern about social image, with the consequence that the family suffers. One example might be that of a family member who wishes to have counseling for abusive childhood events but other family member(s) object and forbid it as an embarrassment to the family or for fear of creating a perception that the family is weak or divided. In this example, the concerns of the family member wishing assistance may be unrelated to other family members and are not a sign of weakness, but decisions based on fears of what others might think sometimes prevent appropriate care.

You have asked what to do since psychological problems sometimes make it difficult for you to participate in community events and Assembly meetings. In striving to follow the Teachings and the best medical advice you can obtain, you will want to remember that the healing you do now is an investment that will enable you to better serve in the future. Ideally, you would combine concentrating on healing with avenues of service which do not interfere with it.

*(Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, dated October 23, 1994)*

Failure to encourage an appropriate healing remedy for an emotionally or psychologically traumatized member of a family is likely to adversely affect the future happiness and well-being of every member, for 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, "The injury of one shall be considered the injury of all."<sup>[19]</sup>

## **Consider Establishing Separate Residences**

There is no obligation on a wife, who is being subjected to beating by her husband, to continue living with him; she has the freedom to leave him and to live in a separate domicile if she feels it necessary to do so.

*(Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Australia, dated April 12, 1990)*

The establishment of separate residences in cases of domestic violence does not automatically establish a year of waiting as application for a Bahá'í divorce. The purpose of establishing separate residences in such cases is, first and foremost, a matter of protection. It provides an opportunity for rehabilitative interventions while allowing a decision to be made in relative safety about whether to attempt to save the marriage. (For guidance on establishing a year of waiting, refer to *Developing Distinctive Bahá'í Communities: Guidelines for Spiritual Assemblies*, Chapter 17.)

## **Considerations for Individuals Pertaining to Confidentiality**

### **Individuals Should Maintain Confidences**

Individuals may find themselves placed in situations where others share confidential information with them. As a matter of principle, when a person promises to keep a confidence, it is generally not permissible to break that promise (special circumstances are cited below). Bahá'ís should do everything possible to uphold the virtue of trustworthiness and comply with requests for confidentiality, as advised by the Universal House of Justice:

It is an important principle of the Faith that one must not promise what one is not going to fulfill. Therefore, if a Bahá'í accepts confidential information either by virtue of his profession (e.g., as a doctor, a lawyer, etc.), or by permitting another person to confide in him, he is duty bound to preserve that confidentiality.

*(Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, dated August 2, 1982)*

## **Individuals Should Be Cautious about Promising Confidentiality**

While the decision to keep or disclose a confidence is ultimately a matter of individual conscience, there is a distinction between keeping confidences in matters involving harm to others and other kinds of confidences. Individuals should be cautious about promising confidentiality in situations where abuse may be involved.

## **Promise of Confidentiality under Duress Is Not Binding**

A promise of confidentiality given under duress is not binding, as it is a common tactic used by abusers to conceal misconduct. It is all the more reason to seek professional assistance and civil protection and to report the matter to Bahá'í institutions.

## **Obedience to Civil Law Takes Precedence over Confidentiality**

Under civil law, individuals may be compelled to reveal to civil authorities information shared with them in confidence. For Bahá'ís, when preservation of confidentiality conflicts with civil law, the principle of obedience to civil law takes precedence.

## **Consequences of Breaching Confidentiality**

In addition to the potential for endangering others, one should be aware that a breach of confidentiality damaging the reputation of an individual may lead to a civil lawsuit. In Bahá'í communities where breaches of confidentiality and/or backbiting are endangering others or causing disunity, the institutions may invoke administrative sanctions for the protection of the community.

## **Person Sharing Confidence Should Be Encouraged to Seek Assistance**

If someone shares a confidence that refers to a situation of domestic violence or abuse involving Bahá'ís, the person sharing the confidence should be encouraged to seek assistance from a Local Spiritual Assembly, the National Spiritual Assembly, or the Auxiliary Board. (Refer to “Turn to Local Spiritual Assembly” and “When to Turn to National Spiritual Assembly or Auxiliary Board” above.)

Of course, the person should also be encouraged to seek immediate civil protection and/or assistance from social services, as needed.

## **Obligations of Person Observing, Suspecting, or Receiving a Confidence about Abuse**

After encouraging the person who shared a confidence concerning abuse or domestic violence to seek assistance as above, the person receiving the confidence should consider carefully any obligation on his or her part to report to civil authorities.

In some jurisdictions, civil laws require all individuals to report certain observed or suspected offenses such as abuse or neglect of children or elders. It is important for individuals who have received personal confidences or have witnessed or suspect incidents of child abuse/neglect or domestic violence to contact local child abuse, adult protective or domestic violence agencies to ascertain the most current reporting laws in their area, and to comply with them. Confidences acquired as a result of Assembly membership are not the responsibility of the individual and should be handled by the Assembly.

A person observing or suspecting abuse or domestic violence is not obligated to bring the matter up with any of the parties involved. However, if the alleged abuser is a Bahá'í, the following general guidance



from the Universal House of Justice about reporting violations of Bahá'í law to Bahá'í institutions should be considered:

While it can be a severe test to a Bahá'í to see fellow believers violating Bahá'í laws or engaging in conduct inimical to the welfare and best interests of the Faith, there is no fixed rule that a believer must follow when such conduct comes to his notice. A great deal depends upon the seriousness of the offense and upon the relationship which exists between him and the offender.

If the misconduct is blatant and flagrant<sup>[20]</sup> or threatens the interests of the Faith the believer to whose attention it comes should immediately report it to the Local Spiritual Assembly. Once it is in the hands of the Assembly the believer's obligation is discharged and he should do no more than pray for the offender and continue to show him friendship and encouragement- unless, of course, the Spiritual Assembly asks him to take specific action ... If, for some reason, he is reluctant at that stage to inform his Spiritual Assembly, he can consult an Auxiliary Board member or assistant.

*(Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, dated February 20, 1977)*

In general, it is preferable that the abused person rather than a third party bring the issue to a Local Assembly. In some cases, the abused person may be willing to go to an Assembly if accompanied by a friend. However, there may be situations in which the abused person does not want to go to an Assembly directly and also does not want anyone else to bring the matter to an Assembly. If the abuse is severe, this may present the third party with a difficult decision. In some situations, reporting domestic violence to an Assembly might further endanger the abused party, particularly if there were to be a breach of Assembly confidentiality and the abuser were to become aware of the report. This danger is particularly apparent when the alleged abuser, or a relative or close friend of the alleged abuser, serves on the Assembly. Any individual who is not sure how to proceed in a situation of domestic violence is encouraged to request guidance from the National Assembly.

## **Obligations of Bahá'í Professionals concerning Reporting Abuse**

Confidentiality laws pertaining to professionals are designed to provide a venue for individuals, as clients, to be able to share personal information with professionals qualified to provide some kind of legal, medical, psychological or other assistance. But state laws also establish legal requirements for professionals such as physicians, lawyers, educators and sometimes clergy to report abuse of certain kinds. Accordingly, Bahá'í professionals who receive confidential information in their capacities as professionals must comply with civil laws as well as ethical standards pertaining to their profession.

In cases where civil law creates a mandated reporting requirement, a Bahá'í professional may consider whether she or he is also permitted to share the information with the appropriate Local Assembly or the National Assembly and whether circumstances would make it wise to do so.

Bahá'í professionals who receive confidential information outside their professional capacities are bound only by the considerations that apply to individuals generally, unless the laws and ethical standards governing their profession specify otherwise.

## **Role and Responsibilities of Local Spiritual Assembly**

### **General Considerations**

#### **Whole Purpose Is to Protect**

The whole purpose of the Assemblies is to protect the Faith, the Communities, and the individual Bahá'í as well.

*(Shoghi Effendi, Principles of Bahá'í Administration, p. 58)*

In applying the following principles to cases of domestic violence, the Assembly should use extreme care not to take any action that it or the abused person feels might further endanger anyone (refer to “Investigation Must Not Endanger” in the Investigate the Facts section).

### **If Domestic Violence Occurs outside Jurisdiction**

If a Local Spiritual Assembly becomes aware of a situation of domestic violence occurring among individuals living outside its jurisdiction, the Assembly should bring the matter to the attention of the National Spiritual Assembly.

### **Role Will Vary If Both Parties Are Not Bahá'í**

Throughout this supplement, guidance is given based upon the assumption that both parties are Bahá'ís. Should the abuser not be a Bahá'í, the Assembly would have no need to consider potential administrative sanctions. However, it may still choose to work on other aspects of the situation, according to guidance in this supplement, with any party requesting it to do so.

### **Unexpected Challenges to Functioning**

Domestic violence is a matter that calls for resolute and decisive intervention on the part of an Assembly. An Assembly unaccustomed to such intervention may find itself unexpectedly challenged in its functioning, for reasons such as the following:

- The alleged abuser being a member of the Assembly
- Fear of retaliation or intimidation by the alleged abuser or other family members
- Fear of alienating others
- Fear of causing division in the community
- Deep differences in fundamental assumptions and beliefs of individual Assembly members
- Shock, disbelief and grief of Assembly members following exposure of misconduct by someone who is a well known and trusted member of community

If an Assembly becomes aware that a Bahá'í is mistreating another person, it has a responsibility to use its collective will to counsel that individual about his or her actions. If its counsels are not accepted, the Assembly should not hesitate to implement stronger measures, such as the recommendation that administrative sanctions be placed on the believer.

If an Assembly finds itself unable to function effectively concerning a case of domestic violence, it should immediately contact the National Spiritual Assembly rather than neglect the matter. Should the Local Assembly fail to act promptly in this regard, any individual member of the Assembly would be free to bring to the matter to the attention of the National Assembly. In some situations, the Local Assembly may wish to recommend that jurisdiction be transferred to another Assembly.

### **When Alleged Abuser Is Assembly Member**

Concerning the question of the presence of a member of an Assembly during the discussion of his personal problems, all members of a Spiritual Assembly have the right and duty to participate in all meetings of the Assembly. The Assembly cannot require a member to absent himself from a properly called Assembly meeting.

*(Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, dated April 23, 1964)*

It should also be understood that a member may wish to absent himself from a meeting at which subjects in which he is personally involved are to be discussed. In such cases he may do so unless the Assembly requires him to be present.

*(Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, dated January 22, 1975)*

In some situations, reporting domestic violence to an Assembly might further endanger the abused party if the abuser serves on the Assembly. When an Assembly Secretary or any other member receives a report of abuse and the alleged abuser or a relative or close friend of the abuser serves on the Assembly, it is suggested that the person receiving the report contact the National Spiritual Assembly for guidance on how to proceed.

As stated under “Unexpected Challenges to Functioning,” if an Assembly finds itself unable to function effectively concerning a case of domestic violence, due to the fact that the alleged abuser is an Assembly member or for any other reason, it should contact the National Assembly.

### **Act to Protect but Make No Judgment Before Investigating Facts**

The Assembly should promptly look into any report of domestic violence, if it is possible to do so without causing further danger to anyone involved (refer to “Investigation Must Not Endanger” in the Investigate the Facts section) and act to protect while it investigates the facts of the situation. It cannot, however, make a judgment about the matter until it has assessed the facts and should not take a position one way or the other until it has done so. Any investigation undertaken by the Assembly must not be allowed to delay mandated reporting to civil authorities nor to interfere in any way with the procedures of those authorities.

### **Combine Dual Roles of Loving Shepherd and Administering Justice**

In coming to decisions concerning any situation of domestic violence brought to its attention, an Assembly should bear in mind that it is required to serve as a loving shepherd and also to administer justice. Cases involving abuse are always distressing and sometimes polarizing within the membership of the Assembly itself. The Assembly must conserve its detachment and sense of justice to meet its responsibility to assist with the protection and spiritual development of all the souls under its jurisdiction, regardless of their attainments or shortcomings. While its first responsibility is to protect the abused, it must also seek to address the spiritual condition and behavior of the offender.

The divinely ordained institution of the Local Spiritual Assembly operates at the first levels of human society and is the basic administrative unit of Bahá'u'lláh's World Order. It is concerned with individuals and families whom it must constantly encourage to unite in a distinctive Bahá'í society, vitalized and guarded by the laws, ordinances and principles of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. It protects the Cause of God; it acts as the loving shepherd of the Bahá'í flock.

*(Message from the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World, Naw-Rúz 1974)*

### **Address Needs of Both Individuals and Community**

The Assembly should be aware that the alleged offender, as well as the abused party, is in need of emotional and spiritual support. In its role as loving shepherd of the community, the Assembly should provide reassurance of its love to everyone involved and provide not only guidance but also a support network in the realization that frequent counsel and encouragement may be needed for all parties. The Assembly must also be aware of the potentially divisive effects the situation may have upon the community and urge believers to contain any discussion of the matter to its duly appointed representatives.

In some cases, the Assembly may need to contact individual Bahá'ís who are not involved in the case to respond to their concerns and ask them to refrain from discussing the matter with others. If they are unresponsive, stronger measures may be required, such as a warning from the Assembly, or imposition of administrative sanctions, if they continue to be unresponsive.

If the problem of backbiting has become more widespread, a community deepening may be needed for the purpose of educating people on the subject of domestic violence, the roles of the individual, the

Assembly, and the Auxiliary Board, and ways in which the community may support a healthy environment and protect itself from misconduct.

### **May Intervene without Consent of Parties**

In matters which affect the Cause the Assembly should, if it deems it necessary, intervene even if both sides do not want it to, because the whole purpose of the Assemblies is to protect the Faith, the Communities, and the individual Bahá'í as well.

*(Shoghi Effendi, Principles of Bahá'í Administration, p. 58)*

In applying this principle to cases of domestic violence, the Assembly should use extreme care not to take any action (such as contacting the alleged abuser) that it or the abused person feels might further endanger anyone. However, if the alleged abuser is a Bahá'í, the Assembly may be obligated to intervene whether the abused party wishes it to do so or not, as long as such intervention does not endanger anyone further (refer to “Advise Accused Party of Possible Consequences of Misconduct” in the Assist in Rehabilitation of Abuser section, as well as “Investigation Must Not Endanger” in the Investigate the Facts section).

If the alleged abuser is not a Bahá'í, the Assembly would have no obligation to intervene with him or her since he or she is not under the Assembly's jurisdiction, but may still offer its assistance (according to the guidance in this *Supplement*) to any party who requests it.

### **Initiate Action for Solution of Problem**

The Local Spiritual Assemblies should neither be like private agents prying into the lives of the believers and seeking out their personal problems, nor should they condone glaring disregard of the Holy Laws. Whenever it becomes known that one of the believers is flagrantly disobeying the Teachings of the Faith, whether spiritual, ethical, moral, or administrative, the Assemblies should not allow such a situation to become a source of backbiting among the friends or deteriorate into either the loss of the dignity of the Teachings in the eyes of the Bahá'ís and non-Bahá'ís, or the eventual inactivity of the believers, as you have observed. The Assemblies, with the encouragement and under the continuous guidance of your National Assembly, should, in the name of protecting the interests of the Faith, themselves initiate action for the solution of the problem, and handle it with love, wisdom, and firmness.

*(Letter from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, dated November 12, 1965)*

### **Be Careful to Conform to Civil Law**

The cardinal principle which we must follow ... is obedience to the government prevailing in any land in which we reside ...

*(Shoghi Effendi, Directives of the Guardian, p. 57)*

An Assembly must be careful not to interfere with established legal procedures. Many states require persons in certain positions, e.g., teachers, therapists, doctors, clergy, etc., to report cases such as child abuse, sexual molestation, battering, severe neglect, and so forth. Some states are now also mandating reporting of elder abuse.

State laws may differ considerably on how various kinds of abuse, neglect, and molestation are defined and these definitions are subject to on-going review and change. **It is of paramount importance that upon receipt of information regarding abuse, neglect or other domestic violence that the Local Spiritual Assembly contact local protective or domestic violence agencies for guidance on the current reporting requirements and conform to them without delay.** In any situation where a Bahá'í institution is legally required to report abuse or suspected abuse, it should appoint a representative to do so on its behalf.

(Refer also to “Cautions for Child Abuse Cases” in the Special Considerations section and “Child Abuse Must Be Reported to Civil Authorities” in the Protect the Abused section, as well as to Chapter 15 of *Developing Distinctive Bahá'í Communities: Guidelines for Spiritual Assemblies.*)

### **Preservation of Confidentiality Is Utmost Concern**

In matters of domestic violence, aside from the requirements of civil reporting, preservation of confidentiality is of the utmost concern for the protection of everyone involved. The ability of the Assembly to preserve the sanctity of its meetings and the information to which it is privy determines, to a great extent, the willingness of individuals to entrust it with sensitive personal matters. The National Spiritual Assembly asks that, effective Ridván 2003, all members of Local Spiritual Assemblies complete and sign a form agreeing to protect the confidentiality of any information or material gained as a direct result of their membership on the Local Assembly, just as it asks its own members to sign such a document.

Regarding the question of confidentiality, the believers should be educated to a deeper understanding of the value of their turning to their institutions for assistance with such problems, confident that by this means justice will prevail. Together with that, it is essential that the members of the Assemblies be fully aware of the obligation imposed upon them to avoid any leakage of information from the Assembly meeting to other believers who have no legitimate reason to be so informed.

*(Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Australia, dated April 12, 1990)*

In domestic abuse situations strict preservation of confidentiality protects not only the safety but also the reputations of the individuals and families involved while the truth of a matter is being ascertained. It further protects the Assembly itself with regard to privileged communications.

If an abused individual has separated from an alleged perpetrator, under no circumstances should a member of the Assembly or an appointed representative take it upon him or herself to divulge information concerning the victim's whereabouts to the alleged perpetrator or to anyone else, nor should the Assembly itself presume to do so without express permission of the abused person. Moreover, in situations where the abused may give permission to provide such information to the alleged perpetrator but the Assembly deems it unwise, it is not obligated to do so.

### **Authority to Be Expressed with Love, Humility and Respect**

The temperament of authority in the administration of justice varies according to the degree of the gravity of each case. Some cases require that the Assembly take action that is firm or drastic. Even so, Assembly members have always to be mindful that the authority they wield must in general be expressed with love, humility and a genuine respect for others. Thus exercised, authority strikes a natural note and accords with that which is acceptable to spiritually attuned and fair-minded souls.

*(Letter from the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, dated May 19, 1994)*

### **Can Change Decisions If New Facts Emerge**

Local Spiritual Assemblies are neither infallible nor omniscient and must make their decisions based on the facts available to them in light of relevant spiritual principles. Those decisions may change if new information comes to light regarding a particular situation. This includes facts concerning the actions of individuals or new guidance from the Universal House of Justice, and may also include new information in the fields of scientific and social research.

## **Turn to National Spiritual Assembly or Auxiliary Board**

Local Assemblies may turn to the National Spiritual Assembly or to the Auxiliary Board for guidance. These institutions may have experience, instructions, or information bearing on a situation that are not otherwise available to the Local Spiritual Assembly. For example, an abuser may have a previous history of abuse. It should be borne in mind that violations of Bahá'í law and disciplinary matters are generally the responsibility of Spiritual Assemblies and not the Auxiliary Board, so Local Assemblies should turn primarily to the National Assembly for guidance in handling these aspects of abuse cases.

In general, it is not the task of Auxiliary Board members, but rather that of the Spiritual Assemblies, to deal with the personal problems of individuals and conflicts between them and with disciplinary matters. However, the Auxiliary Board members and their assistants are vital elements of the Bahá'í Administrative Order, with functions which include the counselling of believers. If a believer approaches an Auxiliary Board member or an assistant with a personal matter, it is for the Board member or assistant to decide whether to give advice or ask the believer to turn to the Spiritual Assembly.

*(The Universal House of Justice, The Institution of the Counselors, p. 24)*

Advice to a Local Assembly from an Auxiliary Board member or assistant may be especially helpful in consulting on aspects of the situation such as family support, the impact on the community of an abusive situation, or allegations of abuse.

Assemblies sometimes hold the mistaken view that the names of the victim, the alleged abuser, and other involved persons should be withheld from senior institutions of the Faith in the interests of protecting the reputations of the individuals involved. Exchange of confidential personal information between the National Spiritual Assembly and Local Assemblies or between the elected and appointed institutions of the Faith is occasionally necessary to facilitate handling of difficult matters and does not constitute a breach of confidentiality. On the contrary, Assemblies withholding from senior institutions vital details or relevant information that would facilitate handling of the situation may delay or obstruct resolution of a case or protection of the community.

## **May Seek Help from Outside Sources**

In addition to private practice professionals, there are many civil, legal and social service agencies which are devoted to providing assistance in situations of domestic violence. These resources may be called upon by the Assembly for its own use, as well as for the aid of the persons involved. Many such agencies offer free or low-cost seminars to provide increased awareness and understanding of domestic violence. Assemblies are encouraged to identify such resources locally and send representatives to take advantage of training opportunities before domestic violence situations arise. If the Assembly does not have a list of its own resources, it may begin to establish one by referring to the Resource List of National Support Organizations at the end of this supplement.

## **Protect the Abused**

### **Safety First**

A Local Spiritual Assembly may find itself faced, at any time, with the need to make emergency or other contacts on behalf of domestic violence victims. While it should be prepared to do everything possible to ensure the safety of everyone involved in any domestic violence situation that comes to its attention, it should not attempt to set up a crisis hotline or response unit, as those are not its functions, nor should it place other members of the community in danger by attempting to intervene directly in a crisis situation.

However, in preparation for such occurrences, every Assembly should have an emergency response plan for referring crisis calls and handling domestic violence reports. It should maintain an up-to-date

resource list of local protection and support services and how to refer people to them. The Assembly should be aware that in actual crisis situations, time is of the essence and there should be no delay in seeking protective assistance, if the abused party wishes it. A sample crisis response protocol for Assemblies, which the Assembly may modify for its own use, is included at the end of this supplement.

If the Local Spiritual Assembly receives a report in person, by telephone, or other means from an adult, a youth or a child that someone is being abused, it should respond in the following ways:

- General approach and demeanor:
  - Ask whether the person is bringing this to the attention of the Assembly or only to the individual contacted. If it is to the individual, the Assembly member should follow the guidance in the Role of the Individual section.
  - Find out whether the person reporting is the abused party, if they want help and what they want help with, using open-ended questions and giving the person the opportunity to speak freely without interruption.
  - Without making a judgment, act as if the report of abuse is true and listen compassionately. Take the report in a calm, assertive, supportive manner, without expressing shock or disbelief, as these responses may discourage the person from contacting the Assembly again or reinforce his or her sense of embarrassment, shame, or feeling of responsibility for the abuse. Affirm that bringing it to the attention of the Assembly was the right decision, that it took courage to do so, and that no person has the right to subject another to abuse.
  - Treat the person reporting with courtesy, respect, loving-kindness and patience. Do not blame, judge, criticize, hurry the person, or try to impose decisions. Recognize that each person responds differently to crisis.
  - Be sensitive to the possibility that in some situations, there may be more than one abuser.
- Responding to a telephone call:
  - If the caller indicates that they or someone who is with them is in immediate danger, they should be strongly encouraged to immediately call 911 or their local police emergency number (if 911 is not implemented in their area). If the caller seems hesitant or reluctant, the Assembly member receiving the call may offer to place a call 911 or the police, if the caller wishes. Local Assemblies should contact their local police to determine where to refer an emergency call and what information is required.
  - If, at any time during the call, screams or other sounds of violence are heard, the Assembly member receiving the call should ask the caller if they are all right and if they want the Assembly member to call the police on their behalf. If the answer is affirmative, the Assembly member should obtain the necessary referral information and relay it without any delay to 911 or local police.
  - An Assembly member receiving a crisis call should NOT go to the home or location of the caller during a domestic violence crisis, as such situations can be unpredictable and extremely volatile. It is the function of law enforcement authorities, not private citizens, to intervene in such situations.
- If an abused party comes to an Assembly member's home to report a situation of domestic violence, the Assembly member may best assist by following the above advice regarding general approach and demeanor. The Assembly member may also wish to offer the abused party the use of their telephone to place calls for protection and assistance. If at any time, the Assembly member feels they or anyone in their home is in imminent danger, they should not hesitate to call the police.
- Suggesting and offering resources:
  - Bear in mind that only the abused party can decide whether to leave or stay in an abusive situation and may not wish to involve civil authorities. Ascertain whether the abused party and any other people involved are safe and whether contact has been made with appropriate medical, police and social support services, such as child or adult protective services. If further information or assistance is desired by the abused party, help her or him to obtain it. This may

include protective, medical, welfare, shelter, court or other services, as well as contacts with family and friends.

- If possible, the Assembly should offer to provide someone to accompany the abused person for moral and emotional support when seeking services. The Assembly should consider that many individuals may be more comfortable being accompanied by someone of the same gender, and be aware that some women's shelters do not permit men on the premises.
- As immigrants and other minorities may experience language or cultural barriers, it would be helpful, if possible, to provide someone familiar with their language and culture to accompany them, if such assistance is not provided by the agencies involved.
- Depending on the circumstances, encourage the abused party to consider the possibility of obtaining a court order of protection, with assistance from local domestic violence professionals, if one is not already in place. Under the Violence Against Women Act,<sup>[21]</sup> such an order is generally enforceable wherever it is issued and in all other U.S. jurisdictions, including all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Indian tribal lands, and U.S. overseas territories. Orders of protection issued by foreign courts are not enforceable in the U.S.
- As far as possible, in keeping with Bahá'í principles, respect and support the abused party's decisions, encouraging the person to stay in touch with the Assembly, and conveying assurance of the Assembly's concern for her or his safety and that it will assist in any way it can.
- Avoid making promises or commitments that the Assembly will not be able to keep and note for follow-up any promises that are made.
- Assure the caller that strict confidentiality will be maintained concerning the matter, except as required by law, and that the Assembly will offer its prayers for the safety and well being of everyone involved.
- Arrange as soon as possible for a contact person, preferably of the same gender, whose responsibility it is to be a liaison between the Local Spiritual Assembly and the abused party and establish a support network to help provide information, protection and safety.

Note that in situations where the alleged abuser or relative or close friend of the alleged abuser is a member of the Assembly, it is suggested that the Assembly member receiving the report contact the National Spiritual Assembly for guidance rather than conveying the report directly to the Local Assembly. (Refer also to “When Alleged Abuser Is Assembly Member” in the Role and Responsibilities of Local Spiritual Assembly: General Considerations section).

(Refer to the Suggested Crisis Response Guidelines for Assemblies at the end of this supplement for additional suggestions about how to handle crisis calls).

The Assembly should also make a written record of the report, including notes and impressions, and perhaps take photographs of the abused party's condition or property to serve as the basis for Assembly consultation. (Refer also to “Maintain Accurate Records and Ensure Confidentiality” in the Investigate the Facts section.)

## **Child Abuse Must Be Reported to Civil Authorities**

In most states, Assemblies having reasonable cause to believe that a child has been abused are legally obligated to report the matter to civil authorities. As the legal definition of child abuse varies from place to place and may be subject to legislative change, the Assembly must find out in every case how it is defined in its own jurisdiction before it can determine its obligation for reporting. There may also be published guidelines to assist reporting parties to determine what is reasonable cause to believe abuse has occurred. However, regardless of whether Assemblies are obligated by law, it is the policy of the National Spiritual Assembly to require that Local Assemblies report to civil authorities when they have reasonable cause to believe that child abuse has occurred. (For a more detailed explanation, refer to “Cautions for Child Abuse Cases” in the Special Considerations section and to Chapter 15 of *Developing Distinctive Bahá'í Communities: Guidelines for Spiritual Assemblies*).



## **Decision to Leave Can Only Be Made by Victim**

Because of the hazards involved in either leaving or staying, a decision of whether or not to leave can only be made by the abused party, who should not be pressured by the Assembly one way or the other either as to the time frame involved or about which action to take. Well-meaning friends or advisors, and even the Assembly, may not be aware of all the circumstances or have a sense of what may constitute safety or danger in differing situations.

Should family members be counseled to remain together to try and reconcile “to maintain unity” or “preserve the family,” there is no guarantee that worse abuse will not occur. (See also Determining Whether to Assist Parties with Consultation section, as well as “Abuse May Lead to Estrangement, Separation or Divorce” and “Challenge to Preserve Unity and Develop Spiritual Patterns of Family Life” in the Support Families section.)

As the large majority of significant injury or death occurs in male to female violence, the following advice is most frequently applicable to women. In cases where an abused woman does not wish to leave, the Assembly may encourage her to devise a carefully thought out escape plan with the expert assistance of local women's shelters or other professional support agencies, in the event that she should change her mind and decide to leave. However, the Assembly itself should not attempt to devise an escape plan.

When domestic violence occurs involving men as victims, it should be handled with equal concern and circumspection. In those instances, it is unlikely that there will be shelter services available, so other resources may need to be found. (Refer also to “Male Adult or Youth Victims May Have Special Needs” and “Rape Victims Entitled to Loving Support” in the Special Considerations section.)

## **Take Care Not to Burden Victim with Responsibility for Abuser**

Any involvement of the Assembly should be handled so as to support families and individuals without burdening the abused in any way with the responsibility for either the actions or the transformation of their abusers. Some of the ways in which abused individuals have been burdened by well-meaning but misinformed individuals or Assemblies have been by:

- Shifting responsibility to the abused by suggesting or inferring that she or he “must have done something to invite it [the abuse].”
- Saying or implying that objecting to the abuse would be to cause disunity.
- Instructing the abused person to “hold the family together no matter what” or to “go back and live up to the Teachings.”
- In the case of children and youth, disbelieving them and telling them to be more obedient to and/or more respectful of the person(s) being accused of abuse.

## **Assist the Abused during Transition to Independence**

Assemblies should be aware that in cases of separation due to domestic violence single parents with dependent children, especially women, often undergo extreme financial hardship and are at significant risk for homelessness. The Assembly should make whatever effort its means permit to assist the abused family to find the resources required to care for its basic needs during the transition to independence from the abusive parent (refer to the Support Families section). The Assembly may also wish to advise the abused party to seek legal advice to protect the financial interests of the family.

## **Encourage Abused to Participate in Support Groups**

Participation in victim support groups, which are therapeutic in nature and purpose, may help abused parties identify their feelings and promote their abilities to make choices. Such support groups provide

an opportunity for victims of domestic violence to share their experiences and discover the resources and options available to them.

Bahá'í women's groups and men's groups serve a different purpose, providing an opportunity for Bahá'ís to develop social relationships with other Bahá'ís of the same gender seeking to apply the spiritual principles of the Faith in their daily lives.

## **Encourage Women to Arise and Demonstrate Importance of Their Role**

The Universal House of Justice has in recent years urged that encouragement be given to Bahá'í women and girls to participate in greater measure in the social, spiritual and administrative activities of their communities, and has appealed to Bahá'í women to arise and demonstrate the importance of their role in all fields of service to the Faith.

*(Letter written of behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, dated January 24, 1993)*

## **Investigate the Facts**

### **Investigation Must Not Endanger**

Whenever an Assembly receives an allegation of domestic abuse, it must take great care in evaluating how to proceed. The Assembly must decide how to determine the facts without endangering anyone further. If circumstances exist where meetings with any party involved or investigation of the facts would—in the judgment of the Assembly or the abused—further endanger the abused or anyone else, the Assembly may not be able to proceed.

Once civil authorities do become involved, the Assembly should not expect to be engaged in the investigation of material facts. Nonetheless, it will wish to attempt to obtain comments from the parties involved for its own consultation, if this can be done without endangering anyone or interfering with the civil investigation.

It is essential that the Assembly be cautious in any contact with the abused party concerning the matter. Furthermore, before approaching an alleged abuser, the Assembly should, in consultation with the abused and with advice from domestic violence professionals as necessary, attempt to assess the risk of any proposed approach and take care to ensure the safety of everyone involved before carrying out any actions. In any situation in which the Assembly has exhausted its local advisory resources and is still uncertain how to proceed, it should seek guidance from the National Spiritual Assembly.

### **Investigate with Diligence and Persistence**

When an allegation is made that a believer has violated Bahá'í law, irrespective of the consequences in civil law, the process of investigation calls for a diligent and persistent effort by the Assembly to ascertain the facts, and for wholehearted cooperation of all concerned in the search for truth.

*(Letter from the Universal House of Justice, dated December 24, 1991)*

Taking as non-judgmental an attitude as possible and bearing in mind the above concerns about endangerment and avoiding interference with civil authorities, the Assembly has the obligation to obtain the viewpoints of all parties involved, if circumstances involving safety permit. It may gather such information as the nature, frequency and duration of the alleged abuse, who is committing the abuse, who is being victimized, financial circumstances, who other caretakers may be (if children, disabled or elderly are involved) availability of extended family supports, and availability of social service resources. Gathering sufficient information will enable it to decide how to proceed in its efforts to support the family, as well as in making decisions concerning violations of Bahá'í law.

## **Always Be Fair**

The National Spiritual Assembly must protect the Faith, but must always be fair. Because a person is accused does not necessarily prove that he or she is guilty; and the administrative bodies cannot be too careful in such matters.

*(Shoghi Effendi, Light of Divine Guidance, Vol.2, p. 132)*

## **Vital That Assembly Be Objective**

In all matters requiring investigation, it is vital that Assemblies be objective and impartial in their approach to all parties involved and refrain from being influenced by the perceived standing of individuals in the community or by their personalities.

## **Guard against False Assumptions and Internal Biases**

The Assembly must be on its guard against false assumptions and internal biases that might influence its own perceptions and decision-making. In its dual roles of loving shepherd and administering justice, it must satisfy itself that it has full knowledge of the facts before reaching any final decisions in a matter. The Assembly should not assume that what works for the majority of domestic violence situations will work for all or that all men, all women, all children, all youth, or all members of a minority are alike. The Assembly should take care to be respectful of the viewpoints of everyone involved in a domestic violence situation and not dismiss or disregard the viewpoints of those who are not Bahá'ís, or make assumptions about their religious or cultural backgrounds.

## **Arrange to Meet Separately with Each Party**

Once the Assembly determines what questions are to be asked and who is to be contacted, it may request individuals to appear before it, send a representative or representatives (who need not be Assembly members) to meet separately with each party, or gather information by mail or telephone. Each party should be met with separately, as victims of violence or coercion are certain to be fearful of speaking frankly in the presence of the offender and may be subject to retaliatory abuse. When single representatives are appointed, they should be of the same gender as the person with whom they are appointed to meet and it may be helpful, if possible, to assign someone from the same cultural background to reduce the probability of miscommunication or misperception by either party. The Assembly should prepare its representative(s) by ensuring that they have thorough familiarity with the contents of this supplement.

The Assembly may also find it useful to assign a pair of representatives, perhaps one male and one female, especially when meeting with the alleged abuser, as a protection for the representatives and as a means of gathering more balanced and complete information, since each will bring a different perspective to the meeting. When meeting with the alleged abuser, for further protection, the Assembly may wish to arrange for its representatives to meet in a suitable public place.

Any contact by the Assembly or its representatives with the abused party concerning the issue of domestic violence should be carried out discreetly with cautious consideration for safety. Arranging how and where to meet with the abused party should be considered very carefully in consultation with the abused, as well as on the basis of advice from qualified domestic violence services. If the abused party has an advocate providing close emotional support, the Local Assembly may wish to indicate that the advocate is welcome to accompany the abused party when meeting with the Assembly or its representatives.<sup>[22]</sup>

The Assembly may also wish to ensure that childcare and transportation are made available, if needed, in order for any party to meet with the Assembly or its representatives or to obtain other assistance.

## **When Accused Flees**

If the accused party has fled the area, or cannot be reached, discovering his or her whereabouts is a legitimate concern of the Assembly. The Local Assembly has a responsibility to try to obtain the comments of the accused party. It also has a duty to keep the National Assembly informed of the whereabouts of the accused, if at all possible, so that the National Assembly can take protective steps in other communities should it wish do so. If unsuccessful in obtaining this information from other sources, the Local Assembly may attempt to obtain this information from authorities involved in the case, explaining its reason for doing so. The Assembly, in its own deliberations, should bear in mind that flight is not necessarily an admission of guilt.

## **On Conducting Interviews**

In abuse cases, there is a natural tendency to want to avoid use of explicit terms. Such avoidance of explicit descriptions is not helpful in addressing abuse situations. It often leads to confusion and later misunderstandings, as different terms mean different things to different people and will later be recalled in terms of the interpreted version of the meaning. This can lead to questions about the credibility of the victim, of the person making the original report, or even of the Assembly's representatives. For this reason, questions that are asked in interviews should be explicit in their content, so that there is no confusion as to the question's meaning. By the same reasoning, any terms that may be confusing or subject to interpretation should be avoided, since they may be misunderstood by the hearer or by someone reading the report of the interview later.

When interviewing or meeting with either party, the Assembly or its representatives should be mindful of the following considerations:

- Do not expect quick responses to questions and allow for silences.
- Do not mistake silence or quietness for shyness, weakness, disability or lack of an opinion.
- Do not mistake silence or failure to defend oneself as guilt or as a reluctance to participate. Fear and shame are common barriers to revealing details of abusive situations.
- Do not interrupt, talk over, talk too much or use a loud voice.
- Avoid being directive, dogmatic, aggressive or unnecessarily intrusive.
- Be aware and be prepared that inquiring into an episode of domestic violence may instigate memories of prior trauma. For example, a person interviewed in a current domestic violence case may recall frightening experiences as a refugee, memories of past rapes, or memories of childhood abuse. Compassion in such instances is appropriate but it is not the role of Assemblies to provide therapeutic intervention in such matters. In gathering facts the Assembly should attempt to clearly differentiate any past trauma from the present occurrence of abuse.

Building rapport and trust are important for the Assembly regardless of the race and ethnic background of the person(s) involved. The Assembly may find that offering and providing specific assistance such as mentoring, advocacy, help in navigating social service systems, or merely providing companionship will help build rapport and trust.

## **Maintain Accurate Records and Ensure Confidentiality**

Taking steps to effectively and permanently ensure the confidentiality of Assembly records concerning abuse or domestic violence is critical. In all situations that may potentially affect administrative rights, the Assembly should maintain clear and accurate confidential records of any information that comes to it. (For more details on the specific handling of confidential records, refer to Chapter 3 of *Developing Distinctive Bahá'í Communities: Guidelines for Spiritual Assemblies*.) As explained in the preceding point on conducting interviews, the Assembly will want to use clear and unambiguous terms and include

specific details in its confidential records. (Refer also to making a record of the victim's initial report as noted in "Safety First" in the Protect the Abused section.)

The Assembly will also wish to keep informed, to the extent possible, of case developments within the civil and criminal justice systems. This may include keeping track of the original police report, indictments, warrants, arraignment, pleadings, and ultimate findings in criminal cases. It will want to know of any orders of protection issued by the court or adult or child protective services, all of which will form part of its confidential record of the matter. Bahá'ís who are family members may be helpful in this, but should not be relied upon exclusively, both to avoid adding to their burdens and because they themselves may have reasons for not being entirely candid in such matters.

Copies of important documents or findings, or summaries of their contents, should be included with any recommendations the Assembly may make to the National Spiritual Assembly (refer to the Report to National Spiritual Assembly section).

### **Confidences Must Be Strictly Maintained**

Assemblies with large Bahá'í communities have found it helpful to appoint committees or task forces on personal status to assist them in gathering background information. Since they must receive information of a sensitive nature, members of such committees and task forces, as well as Assembly members and any appointed Assembly representatives, should be trustworthy and able to maintain the strictest confidences. Because Assemblies are often not involved with situations of domestic violence until the time of separation or of crisis intervention, it is essential for them to understand the hazards involved and to convey to their representatives the extreme importance of protecting confidentiality.

### **Bahá'ís Are Expected to Cooperate with Assembly**

When an allegation is made that a believer has violated Bahá'í law, irrespective of the consequences in civil law, the process of investigation calls for a diligent and persistent effort by the Assembly to ascertain the facts, and for wholehearted cooperation of all concerned in the search for truth. Believers called upon to provide information should, if necessary, be reminded of the responsibility they bear to speak the truth and of the spiritual consequences of a failure to do so. 'Abdu'l-Bahá asserts:

Truthfulness is the foundation of all human virtues. Without truthfulness, progress and success, in all the worlds of God, are impossible for any soul. When this holy attribute is established in man, all the divine qualities will also be acquired.

If this "holy attribute" should adorn the behavior of believers toward others, how much more should it characterize statements which a Bahá'í makes to a divinely ordained institution.

The prospect of a believer's displaying an attitude of hostility, when being interviewed by a Spiritual Assembly or its representatives who are seeking to determine the facts of a matter, is abhorrent. All believers are strongly enjoined to have the utmost respect for the Assemblies, to cooperate fully with them, and to support their decisions. An Assembly inquiring into a matter should not allow itself to be deterred by the hostility of a believer who is withholding relevant information; it should appeal to him for cooperation, remind him forcefully of his responsibilities and, in extreme cases such as threats made to the investigators, warn him of the administrative consequences of the persistence of his deplorable conduct.

*(Letter from the Universal House of Justice, dated December 24, 1991)*

### **When Allegations Are False or Unsubstantiated**

In some cases, the Assembly may decide to take no further action with respect to allegations of abuse due to lack of convincing evidence. It may be unable to determine whether or not the allegations are true

or it may conclude that they are false. In such situations, the Assembly should convey to concerned parties its deep on-going concern for the protection of the community and its members and its commitment to investigating with complete detachment any additional information that may be brought to it about this or future allegations.

If the Assembly determines that there is insufficient evidence to support allegations of abuse, it should act promptly to attempt to heal whatever injuries may have arisen through the allegations and subsequent investigation of them. Records of such situations should be assigned confidential status.

## **Special Considerations**

### **Alcohol or Drug Use Should Be Handled Separately**

Use of alcohol or drugs is not a cause of domestic violence, but Assemblies should be aware that their use may increase its severity. As Bahá'ís are prohibited from the use of intoxicating or illegal substances, any question of alcohol or drug abuse by Bahá'ís should be handled as a separate matter (refer to Chapter 15, *Developing Distinctive Bahá'í Communities: Guidelines for Spiritual Assemblies*).

### **Cautions for Child Abuse Cases**

Federal and state laws clearly indicate that the role of investigating and prosecuting child abuse lies with civil authorities, not with other organizations or individuals. Assemblies having reasonable cause to believe that a child has been abused must promptly report the matter to the civil authorities. No Assembly should presume to try to investigate whether an allegation of child abuse is true. Failure to involve civil authorities from the outset could result not only in further risk of harm to the child involved or to other children, but also in loss of important forensic evidence. Further, attempting to investigate the truth of an allegation of child abuse might also expose the Assembly to accusations of coaching the child, tampering with evidence, obstruction of justice, influencing witnesses, or other charges, as well as allegations by the alleged offender of defamation of character. Additionally, if an Assembly has reasonable cause to believe that a child has been abused but it fails to report to civil authorities in a timely way, there may be penalties under civil law.

Should an allegation of child abuse arise at a Bahá'í school or institute operating under the auspices of the National Spiritual Assembly (including regional schools), reporting requirements and guidelines on how to respond are set out in a policy available from the National Education and Schools Office.

Should an allegation of child abuse arise at a local Bahá'í school or from other children's classes or activities—regardless of whether the alleged abuse occurred at the Bahá'í activity, in the home, or elsewhere—the allegation should be reported promptly to the sponsoring Local Spiritual Assembly, to the child's Local Assembly, or to the National Spiritual Assembly, which will then have the responsibility to contact civil authorities. In some situations, reporting child abuse to a Local Assembly might further endanger the child or others in the family, if there were to be a breach of Assembly confidentiality and the abuser were to become aware of the report. This danger is particularly apparent when the alleged abuser, or a relative or close friend of the alleged abuser, serves on the Assembly. Any individual who is not sure how to proceed in a child abuse situation is encouraged to request guidance from the National Assembly.

Some faulty lines of reasoning that might lead an Assembly, as well as friends and family members, to dismiss allegations of child abuse are that individuals may:

- Feel that they know the alleged offender, and that he or she just wouldn't do something like that
- Believe that abuse perpetrated by one minor against another is just sexual experimentation or curiosity
- Want to believe that, if they are told it only happened once, it will not happen again

- Believe that, if it happened a long time ago, it is no longer important and is no longer a problem
- Fear that it will disrupt the family or the community
- Fear that it will bring disgrace on the family or the Faith
- Think that there isn't enough proof to subject the accused to the embarrassment of an investigation

An Assembly is unlikely to know the truth of an allegation of child abuse. If the allegation is true, the Assembly will not know how many times a child has been abused, how many victims an offender has assaulted, nor if or when an offender will abuse again. The fact that the abuse occurred some time ago does not excuse it, nor will ignoring it prevent its recurrence. Neither embarrassment to individuals nor disruption to the family or community can be used as an excuse to avoid protecting individuals and the community or administering justice.

While an Assembly is awaiting the outcome of a civil or criminal investigation of an allegation of child abuse, it should avoid placing the alleged abuser in unsupervised contact with (or in a position of responsibility that would require contact with) the affected child or youth or other children and youth. When a parent of the abused child is the alleged offender, it rests with the civil authorities to determine whether he or she may continue contact with the child.

### **Child or Youth Victims Have Special Needs and Should Receive Counseling**

Children and youth traumatized by abuse may suffer illnesses and disturbances in sleeping and eating, in addition to academic, psychological and emotional problems. Some may find themselves bullied in school or playground settings by other children or youth who sense their vulnerability. Others may reveal their trauma by displaying some or all of the following: sadness, depression, day dreaming, social withdrawal, sexually provocative behavior and/or angry outbursts. These problems may present in Bahá'í schools and children's classes, as well as public schools or other settings.

Abused children and youth must cope not only with the emotional trauma of whatever abuses they have suffered or witnessed but sometimes, also, with the absence of a primary role model in one or more of their parents, however imperfect it may have been. In some situations, Assemblies may wish to caution parents and others not to pressure children to take sides against either parent.

It is important that abused children and youth receive professional counseling to assist them to cope with their trauma and develop non-violent alternatives for self-expression and conflict resolution in order to interrupt what is often an intergenerational cycle of violence and victimization. Given the importance of such counseling for the future of the children or youth, if no other resources are available and if the Assembly has the resources, it may wish to consider providing a measure of financial support, if needed. The Assembly should refrain from recommending any particular counselor. If the family has no such contact of its own, the Assembly may wish to suggest that they seek a referral from their primary care physician. Referrals for counselors may also be obtained from social support organizations (refer to the Resource List of National Support Organizations and also to "Support for Abused Children and Youth" in the Support Families section).

### **Disabled Victims May Have Special Needs**

Assemblies should be alert to the risks of abuse for people with physical disabilities, including mental illness, and aware that disabilities increase both the risk of being abused and the obstacles faced by survivors of domestic violence as they attempt to achieve safety and independence. People who are disabled tend to have less money, be more socially isolated, and often suffer from lower self-esteem due to societal prejudice. These problems are seriously exacerbated by domestic violence. Persons with disabilities may not always realize or be able to articulate that violence or assault has occurred. The Local Spiritual Assembly will need to be particularly alert in assisting those with disabilities.

## **Elderly Victims May Have Special Needs**

Reasonable cause to believe that an elderly person has been abused may be subject to mandated reporting to civil authorities. While elderly people may be subjected to all types of abuse, including physical and sexual, the most prevalent has to do with abandonment and neglect, including self-neglect. The Assembly should bear in mind that:

- Elderly individuals often suffer depression from biochemical changes associated with aging, from the emotional impact of declining physical capacities and resilience, ill-health, loss of friends and loved ones, or dislocations due to refugee status or placement in nursing homes or other care facilities, where they are sometimes abandoned by relatives who never go to see them.
- Elders sometimes suffer abuses at the hands of family members or caregivers at home or in nursing homes and, due to infirmities or fears, may be unable to articulate the abuse.
- Elders sometimes make false accusations of abuse, due to mental infirmities or other illnesses of aging, such as Alzheimer's disease.
- Some elders may choose to stay in abusive situations (in addition to reasons listed in “Why People Stay in Abusive Relationships: in Definitions of Domestic Violence section), because of habits of acceptance, close ties to relatives, decades of living in the same place and dependence on familiar surroundings, or because they think they will not live much longer anyway and prefer not to undergo the dislocation involved in moving.
- Elders may refuse assistance due to a fear of becoming dependent and the desire not to be a burden on others.

The Assembly should be aware that the experience of declining capacity and resources may be a source of embarrassment, frustration, or despair for the elderly person (in addition to any abuses they may be suffering or have suffered) and should be particularly respectful of the need to preserve the dignity and autonomy of elders to the greatest extent possible. Assistance may be provided through family members, other Bahá'ís, social service agencies, such as adult protective services, and community organizations, or some combination of these (refer to the Resource List of National Support Organizations and also to “Support for Families with Elderly Members” in the Support Families section).

## **Ethnic and Cultural Sensitivity Issues**

While there are no hard and fast rules for working with people of ethnic minorities who have been involved in domestic violence, it is crucial to remember that there is usually considerable diversity within a general ethnic minority and that individuals of any particular minority may or may not display a variety of traits associated with that minority. Ethnic minorities may be comprised of many distinct groups: for example, Southeast Asians, with a diverse range of religious, political and social histories. When an Assembly has members of an ethnic minority group within its area, it should make an effort to acquaint itself with the values and practices of their culture(s), not only to promote better understanding but to equip itself for more sensitive handling of personal status issues in general. At the same time, the Assembly must avoid stereotyping and keep its efforts to be culturally sensitive in conformity with the teachings of the Faith.

The great diversity both in the Faith and in American society requires a broad awareness of many cultural practices. The Assembly may find that some of the following points are useful in handling domestic violence in the dominant culture, as well as in minority cultures, but that not all points will apply to every culture or every member of a given culture, even if it applies to the culture generally. In general, Assemblies that handle domestic violence situations with cultural sensitivity will:

- Be informed, from the perspective of the ethnic minority, of their historical experiences in relation to the mainstream culture, which may differ significantly from the mainstream version. Be respectful of the differences.
- Explore whether a person's preference is to speak about their problems with someone from the



same ethnic background or from a different ethnic background. Some may perceive someone from outside their ethnic group as being better able to maintain confidentiality. Others may feel that only a person of their ethnic background can understand their perspective.

- Take into consideration such issues as level of acculturation, language preferences, immigration status, history or processes, or indigenous history, family structure and dynamics, number of dependents, economic status, and ages of the people involved.
- Explore the meanings of abuse and battering to the persons involved since culture, race, and ethnicity influence how these terms are defined. For example, in some cultures, various forms of abuse are tolerated or have not been considered abuse and may even be regarded by both genders as rightful forms of discipline or as expressions of caring. Nevertheless, cultural acceptance does not render abusive behaviors harmless or legal.
- Be sensitive for the possibility of prior exposure to severe violence, such as a personal or family history of trauma from torture, mutilation, war atrocities, gang rape, arson, bombings, lynchings, or other extreme forms of violence. Prior exposure to other forms of violence may exacerbate the effects of domestic violence.
- Be sensitive to the person's perception of authority figures. For example, some people may have experienced violence and atrocities in their homeland at the hands of government authorities, making them fearful of accepting government services. Others may have experienced abuses of power by police and may be reluctant to report abuse to the police since they fear maltreatment either of themselves or of the abuser by the police.
- Be sensitive to whether the use of first names by younger people toward their elders or by those who are not personally acquainted with one another may be perceived as disrespectful. The use of first names varies from culture to culture.
- Some people may have cultural belief systems about authority figures that impact how they relate to seeking help. If the traditional culture has a hierarchical view of social relationships, the person may view the providers of any services the Assembly might suggest as authority figures, and understand suggestions or advice as directions which they must obey.
- Explore how the person feels about any interventions that the Assembly may suggest. For example, support groups are very common in Western culture, but fear of bringing dishonor and shame onto the family through exposure of personal problems may make this approach less effective or even unacceptable for members of some ethnic groups where potential loss of 'face' could lead to much suffering or possible catastrophe.
- Explore how the person feels about undertaking steps to greater empowerment, such as assertiveness training, improving parenting skills, anger management, improving language skills, refining financial management skills, additional education or job training. If the person wishes to undertake such learning, the Assembly may wish to be of assistance in locating resources that are suitable in terms of safety, language, cost and accessibility.
- Encourage members of ethnic minorities who are victims of domestic violence to seek solutions that are consistent with their cultures, if they wish, insofar as they are in keeping with Bahá'í principles.
- Depending on its resources, the Assembly may wish to consider assisting victims of domestic violence with transportation or other means to access socially, psychologically or emotionally supportive cultural activities, should they wish to do so. As an example, in the case of an American Indian, these might include sweats, powwows or other cultural events, as well as traditional Indian healers. Other ethnic groups would have other traditional supports.
- Be aware that people of oral traditions and those who are illiterate or cannot read or write in English may regard written communications as having little significance. Important communications may best be conveyed in person with notes recorded in writing. A hand delivered letter from an Assembly, in addition to meeting the Assembly's need for a written record, provides an opportunity for the recipient to respond directly and to clarify any misunderstandings with a representative of the Assembly.

The Assembly must avoid any assumption that the cultural values of its majority membership or of the dominant culture are superior, and it should be considerate and respectful of the customs of others. To prevent unintended offense, it should:

- Be aware that many cultures are not based on Western conventions concerning strict adherence to time schedules.
- Avoid any aspect of “easy familiarity,”<sup>[23]</sup> particularly between members of the opposite sex, as casual physical contact may be misunderstood.
- Refrain from social customs involving touch, such as hugging, shaking hands or patting children's heads, unless it is an already established part of a personal reciprocal relationship or is known to be culturally appropriate, as these customs are offensive in some cultures.
- Refrain from criticizing parenting practices different from the norm of the dominant culture or of the Assembly's majority membership.

### **Immigrant Victims May Have Special Needs**

Immigrants may not be aware of available social services or supports in the legal system. Isolation, dependence and fear of abandonment are major problems in abusive situations. The abuser may engage in deliberate isolating behaviors such as preventing the victim's access to friends and family, to opportunities to learn English or to use of the telephone. Self-isolation on the part of the abused party may arise through culturally embedded guilt and shame, which is likely to be encouraged by the abuser as a controlling behavior. Some other considerations that may impact the situation are:

- Fear of being sent back, or having their husbands sent back, to their country of origin, especially for women who are sponsored and dependent upon their sponsors
- Traditions of respect for elders that prevent reporting or acknowledgement of abuses
- Marriages which may have been arranged and which are regarded as alliances between families
- Fear of losing children, as legal systems in some cultures automatically award children to one parent in cases of divorce, or the abuser may falsely threaten that U.S. law will automatically favor one parent over the other
- Negative social impact on other family members, if abuse is revealed, particularly with respect to future marriage prospects of other family members
- Reluctance to go to police or authorities because the abuser is more articulate in English than the victim and will deny the abuse
- Immigration status, history, and processes are very complex and may have negative impact on families. Professional disqualification, unanticipated racism or discrimination, and even family reunifications after years of separation, where earlier arrivals have acculturated to Western society and recent arrivals have not, may cause problems in some families.

Many cultures are strongly patriarchal societies where family honor and the identity of the collective are regarded as paramount, where there may be common family investments, and where the role of women is narrowly defined. Making independent decisions is alien to many women in the world, particularly those of very patriarchal, hierarchical cultural backgrounds, and especially those who are battered and controlled.

Many immigrants are not accustomed to Western-oriented models of social, civil or healthcare services, so it will be helpful for the Assembly to explain whatever suggestions or recommendations it makes and clarify any misconceptions.

Due to experience in the home country, immigrant victims may be fearful of going to the police or relying on the legal system. There may also be practical barriers to obtaining protection and shelter such as language, transportation, dietary and religious customs, and skills needed to function in Western society. In such cases, the Assembly may wish to provide assistance directly or place the abused person in contact with culturally appropriate support services.

## **Immigrant Victims Should Not Be Afraid of Deportation**

Immigrants being subjected to domestic violence, including those on fiancé(e) visas, should not be afraid of being deported for reporting it. If an immigrant is dependent on her or his partner for legal status the Violence Against Women Act, passed in 1994 and reauthorized in 2000, allows the abused partner to self-petition for a visa that leads to permanent residency.

## **Non-U.S. Citizens Convicted of Domestic Violence May Be Deported**

A non-U.S. citizen convicted of an act of domestic violence may be subject to deportation under certain circumstances, no matter how many years he or she has lived in the United States and regardless of whether or not he or she has an Immigration and Naturalization Service Permanent Resident (green) Card.

## **Immorality Should Be Handled Separately**

Whatever the relationship between two adults, whether or not it is regarded as moral within Bahá'í law, if patterns of domestic violence are evident, the guidance for handling domestic violence is to be applied. If issues of immorality<sup>[24]</sup> between adults are involved with cases of domestic violence, they should be dealt with as a separate matter (refer to Chapter 15, *Developing Distinctive Bahá'í Communities: Guidelines for Spiritual Assemblies*).

## **Male Adult or Youth Victims May Have Special Needs**

There are instances when the victim of domestic violence is male rather than female. In such cases, the Local Assembly must act immediately to protect, in the same way it would for a female, with respect and sensitivity to issues that may be relevant from the perspective of male victims. Fear of embarrassment and ridicule due to cultural stereotypes, lack of skill in expressing emotions, lack of support in the criminal justice system and fear of reprisal may contribute to reluctance on the part of male victims to seek or accept assistance.

## **Medical Conditions, Mental Illness or Use of Behavior Altering Substances**

When domestic violence occurs in the context of a situation where the abuser suffers from some form of mental illness or sudden unexplained changes in behavior, the Assembly may wish to suggest that a medical evaluation of the abuser be obtained in order to either treat or rule out medical conditions and the possible use of behavior altering substances, as one aspect of addressing abuse in the home. As with all medical conditions, advice of competent professionals should be sought.

If the broad structure of society is to remain intact, 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.

*(Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, dated September 22, 1983)*

## **Rape Victims Entitled to Loving Support**

Although the following passage refers explicitly to women, men may also be subjected to rape. The guidance applies, therefore, equally to men except where the context would make it impossible.

One of the most heinous of sexual offences is the crime of rape. When a believer is a victim, she is entitled to the loving aid and support of the members of her community, and she is free to initiate action against the perpetrator under the law of the land should she wish to do so. If

she becomes pregnant as a consequence of this assault, no pressure should be brought upon her by the Bahá'í institutions to marry. 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 seek financial support for the maintenance of the child from the father; however, his claim to any parental rights would, under Bahá'í law, be called into question, in view of the circumstances.

The Guardian has clarified, in letters written on his behalf that, "The Bahá'í Faith recognizes the value of the sex impulse," and that, "The proper use of the sex instinct is the natural right of every individual, and it is precisely for this very purpose that the institution of marriage has been established." In this aspect of the marital relationship, as in all others, mutual consideration and respect should apply. 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.

*(Letter written of behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, dated January 24, 1993)*

Sexual abuse and assault, including rape, are crimes, regardless of whether committed by a stranger, acquaintance, relative, or spouse, by a person of the same or opposite sex, and regardless of the age of the victim. An Assembly should be careful not to minimize an allegation of "date rape" or of rape by a spouse. Sexual abuse or assault involving a person under a certain age (the age varies by state) is a crime regardless of whether consent is given or force is used. Assemblies should be aware of the laws applicable in their state. (See also sections on criminal offenses in Chapter 15 of *Developing Distinctive Bahá'í Communities*.)

For resources to educate women on how to protect themselves from date rape and for referral to community legal and counseling resources with experience in cases of date rape, student services departments of colleges and universities may be helpful. (See also Resource List of National Support Organizations.)

## **Teens in Abusive Dating Relationships**

There are potent social pressures in Western society for all teenagers to have a boyfriend or girlfriend. Lack of experience, perceived cultural norms, and abusive role-modeling are some of the factors that may mislead teenagers into believing that violent, jealous, possessive, or intrusive behaviors are signs of love or that immoral behaviors are signs of maturity and independence. Like adults, they may be drawn into a relationship and develop strong feelings for someone who is attentive during the early phase of a relationship before there are obvious signs of abuse. Or they may be drawn into dangerous or immoral situations out of pressure to belong. Once emotional bonds are established between two people, it can be as difficult for teens as for adults to break out of a relationship, particularly if the two share the same circle of friends. Assemblies should not underestimate the depth of emotional attachment of which teens are capable. Because the teenage years are a time when young people normally initiate the process of establishing independence, they may be reluctant to seek help, may feel that they have no one to turn to for help, or may be embarrassed or afraid to admit to anyone that they are in trouble. In allegations of date rape, refer to "Rape Victims Entitled to Loving Support" in the preceding paragraph.

## **Determining Whether to Assist Parties with Consultation**

### **Importance of Consultation**

Bahá'u'lláh also stressed the importance of consultation. We should not think this worthwhile method of seeking solutions is confined to the administrative institutions of the Cause.

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. Wives should not attempt to dominate their husbands, nor husbands their wives.

*(Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, dated August 1, 1978)*

## **Consultation Cannot Take Place Where Fear of Violence or Abuse Is Present**

Consultation has been ordained by Bahá'u'lláh as the means by which agreement is to be reached and a collective course of action defined. It is applicable to the marriage partners and within the family, and indeed, in all areas where believers participate in mutual decision-making. It requires all participants to express their opinions with absolute freedom and without apprehension that they will be censured or belittled; these prerequisites for success are unattainable if the fear of violence or abuse is present.

*(Letter written of behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, dated January 24, 1993)*

## **Domestic Violence Has Nothing to Do with Resolving Differences**

Addressing domestic violence has nothing to do with “resolving differences,” which implies a relationship in which all opinions are valued equally and where true consultation may occur and produce a beneficial outcome. According to guidance in the preceding passages, both the threat and fear of violence must be removed before effective consultation “animated by awareness of the need for moderation and balance” can take place.

## **Individuals Should Be Encouraged to Consult with Institutions**

In domestic violence situations, where consultation between abuser and victim is often inherently impossible, the principle of consultation is likely to be most useful when applied between each party and the institutions, civil and/or Bahá'í, which provide protection, guidance, necessary assistance, and corrective measures.

## **Caution on Advising Parties to Consult Together**

When the Assembly knows or suspects that domestic violence is a factor in a relationship it should be cautious about advising parties to consult, to reconcile or to mediate, as such advice may only serve to perpetuate and exacerbate an already harmful or dangerous situation.

## **Assembly May Provide Neutral Setting to Help Parties Develop Consultation Skills**

As part of an effort to help salvage relationships, an Assembly may decide to provide a neutral setting in which to help parties develop consultation skills. The Assembly will make this decision based on the severity of the situation and bearing in mind the foregoing guidance together with the following considerations, which are conditioned upon constructive action and not merely promises:

- Is the abuser genuinely remorseful?
- Does the abuser assume full responsibility for his or her actions?
- Is the abuser undertaking appropriate counseling?
- Is the abused person willing to risk meeting with the abuser and continuing the relationship?

## **Carry Out Decisions**

### **Assembly Must Not Hesitate to Apply Bahá'í Law**

It is inevitable that this community will, at times, be subject to delinquent behavior of members whose actions do not conform to the standards of the teachings. At such times, the institutions of the Faith will not hesitate to apply Bahá'í law ...

*(Letter written of behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, dated January 24, 1993)*

### **Allow Neither Threats nor Appeals to Divert from Duty**

The 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.

*(Letter written of behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, dated January 24, 1993)*

### **Be Firm and Say What Must Be Said**

Strong ties often exist between members of the Bahá'í community that may make it very difficult to carry out decisions of the Assembly that may hurt, anger, or disappoint family or friends. It is understandable to want to avoid the possible unhappiness or censure of family and friends that may result from carrying out decisions of the Assembly, particularly when issues of confidentiality limit or prohibit explanations about such decisions. Nevertheless, personal considerations should not be allowed to influence the discharge of duties laid upon the Spiritual Assembly, which must, once its decisions are made, proceed with detachment and courage to carry them out.

## **Assist in Rehabilitation of Abuser**

### **Advise Accused Party of Possible Consequences of Misconduct**

As soon as is reasonably possible, without interfering with civil or criminal procedures, or further endangering the abused (refer also to "Investigation Must Not Endanger" in the Investigate the Facts section), the Assembly should consult with the accused party to obtain comments and to advise him or her about possible consequences of violating Bahá'í standards of conduct.

When an incident of abuse comes to the attention of the Assembly as a matter of public record, such as when an arrest has been made or a police log noting a domestic violence disturbance has been published in a local newspaper, if the alleged abuser is a Bahá'í, the Assembly has a duty to bring the matter up with him or her (subject to the considerations above about endangerment), making it clear that the Assembly's involvement is a response to the public record.

It should also provide a contact person to act as liaison between the Assembly and the alleged abuser, to avoid taking up too much of the Assembly's time and so that the accused party will have prompt access to the Assembly, if needed. It may also wish to suggest professional counseling or other supports to help prevent further incidents (refer to the Help Abuser Engage in Process of Spiritual Transformation section).

### **Assembly Must Not Allow Itself to Be Misled**

Assemblies must not allow themselves to be misled by abusers, who are frequently successful manipulators and may seek to discredit victims through accusing them of exaggeration and misrepresentation or may try to engage sympathy on their own behalf by portraying themselves as victims in the situation. Rather than being taken in by such claims, Assemblies should endeavor to

provide a balance of encouragement for such of their qualities as are commendable combined with firm and unequivocal guidance concerning violations of Bahá'í standards of conduct.

## **Those Who Abuse Do Not See Themselves As Abusers and Are Rarely Abusive Outside Home**

Many of those who are abusers in the home do not think of themselves as abusers, do not usually have difficulty controlling their actions outside the home, generally have good work and social relationships and may even be pillars of the community, a pattern that clearly indicates that most abusers are in control of their actions and simply choose to act aggressively in the home. Unfortunately, this pattern often lends itself to disbelief in victims' reports of abusive behavior by “good” or “respectable” Bahá'ís and may lead to unfounded accusations of backbiting on the part of the abused party.

### **Help Abuser Acknowledge Problem**

#### **Denial Is Barrier to Transformation**

One of the greatest barriers to transformation is lack of awareness, evasion, or denial on the part of the abuser that there are behaviors that need to be changed. The Assembly has the responsibility to assist the abuser to recognize which behaviors are not in keeping with Bahá'í standards of conduct.

#### **Kindness Cannot Be Shown the Tyrant or Deceiver**

O ye beloved of the Lord! The Kingdom of God is founded upon equity and justice, and also upon mercy, compassion, and kindness to every living soul. Strive ye then with all your heart to treat compassionately all humankind - except for those who have some selfish, private motive, or some disease of the soul. Kindness cannot be shown the tyrant, the deceiver, or the thief, because, far from awakening them to the error of their ways, it maketh them to continue in their perversity as before. No matter how much kindliness ye may expend upon the liar, he will but lie the more, for he believeth you to be deceived, while ye understand him but too well, and only remain silent out of your extreme compassion.

*(Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 158)*

#### **Sympathy Fortifies Perversity**

The only way we can prove to such people that they are wrong is to censure their conduct; if we sympathize with them we only fortify their perversity and waywardness.

*(Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, dated January 23, 1945)*

#### **Understanding Origin of Behavior Neither Excuses nor Justifies It**

While one may have enormous sympathy for how destructive patterns of behavior originate and that they are often due to the abuser having been abused earlier in life, such compassionate understanding should never be used to excuse or justify misconduct, or to bestow undue sympathy for its consequences, as that only perpetuates the problem and may extend it into the following generation.

## **Help Abuser Engage in Process of Spiritual Transformation**

### **Fear of God May Guard and Restrain Behavior**

Without a clear realization and acknowledgement that specific behaviors are abusive, those who commit such acts lack both the motivation to change and the fundamental safeguard inherent in being consciously aware that their conduct is contrary to God's will and deprives them of His grace. If abusers are able to overcome denial and take responsibility for their conduct, the fear of God may then help to restrain their behavior and protect themselves and others from further misconduct.

O people of God! Give ear unto that which, if heeded, will ensure the freedom, well-being, tranquility, exaltation and advancement of all men. Certain laws and principles are necessary and indispensable...

In formulating the principles and laws a part hath been devoted to penalties which form an effective instrument for the security and protection of men. However, dread of the penalties maketh people desist only outwardly from committing vile and contemptible deeds, while that which guardeth and restraineth man both outwardly and inwardly hath been and still is the fear of God. It is man's true protector and his spiritual guardian. It behoveth him to cleave tenaciously unto that which will lead to the appearance of this supreme bounty. Well is it with him who giveth ear unto whatsoever My Pen of Glory hath proclaimed and observeth that whereunto he is bidden by the Ordainer, the Ancient of Days.

*(Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, pp. 92-93)*

### **Individuals Must Find Redeeming Qualities in Themselves**

Once an individual has recognized his or her problem and achieved the desire and commitment to change, new attitudes and behaviors in keeping with Bahá'í standards of conduct must be developed and maintained. To accomplish this, individuals must find redeeming qualities in themselves, along with the hope and belief that they can change for the better. In their role as spiritual shepherds, Assemblies can be of great assistance in aiding those who abuse to undertake the arduous task of reforming their attitudes and behaviors.

### **Encourage Recognition of Inherent Nobility and God's Love**

You have asked about the need “to make amends for transgressions of a personal nature”. As you know, each individual must resolve his own tests according to the promptings of his conscience. However, it sometimes happens that negative feelings about oneself become an obstacle to successfully passing one's spiritual tests by making it difficult to believe in one's own nobility. To this effect, Bahá'u'lláh assures us:

Veiled in My immemorial being and in the ancient eternity of My essence, I knew My love for thee; therefore I created thee, have engraved on thee Mine image and revealed to thee My beauty.<sup>[25]</sup>

*(Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer dated October 23, 1994)*

This transcendent love of God for man and his innate nobility is further affirmed when Bahá'u'lláh says:

O SON OF SPIRIT! Noble have I created thee, yet thou hast abased thyself. Rise then unto that for which thou wast created.

*(Bahá'u'lláh, The Hidden Words, Arabic no. 22)*

### **Instill Recognition of Purpose of Life**

According to Bahá'í teachings, life is purposeful and the most fundamental of purposes are to know and to love God and to acquire virtues. Beyond these are to promote the oneness of humanity and to carry



forward an ever advancing civilization. But these purposes are not intuitive and must be instilled through education. Conscious knowledge of these purposes is beneficial to the process of spiritual and social transformation. Improving one's character and acquiring virtues is hard, demanding work. Knowing the purpose and goals of acquiring virtues helps give motive and meaning to the work of acquiring them. 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us:

The attainment of any object is conditioned upon knowledge, volition and action. Unless these three conditions are forthcoming, there is no execution or accomplishment.

*('Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 157)*

## **Individual Can Discontinue Vices**

Nature is without volition and acts perforce, whereas man possesses a mighty will. Nature is incapable of discovering mysteries or realities, whereas man is especially fitted to do so. Nature is not in touch with the realm of God; man is attuned to its evidences. Nature is uninformed of God; man is conscious of Him. Man acquires divine virtues; nature is denied them. Man can voluntarily discontinue vices; nature has no power to modify the influence of its instincts.

*('Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 178)*

Some things are subject to the free will of man, such as justice, equity, tyranny and injustice, in other words, good and evil actions; it is evident and clear that these actions are, for the most part, left to the will of man. But there are certain things to which man is forced and compelled, such as sleep, death, sickness, decline of power, injuries and misfortunes; these are not subject to the will of man, and he is not responsible for them, for he is compelled to endure them. But in the choice of good and bad actions he is free, and he commits them according to his own will.

*('Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 248)*

## **Individual Has Choice to Express Spiritual Nature**

In man there are two natures; his spiritual or higher nature and his material or lower nature. In one he approaches God, in the other he lives for the world alone. Signs of both these natures are to be found in men. In his material aspect he expresses untruth, cruelty and injustice; all these are the outcome of his lower nature. The attributes of his Divine nature are shown forth in love, mercy, kindness, truth and justice, one and all being expressions of his higher nature. Every good habit, every noble quality belongs to man's spiritual nature, whereas all his imperfections and sinful actions are born of his material nature. If a man's Divine nature dominates his human nature, we have a saint.

Man has the power both to do good and to do evil; if his power for good predominates and his inclinations to do wrong are conquered, then man in truth may be called a saint. But if, on the contrary, he rejects the things of God and allows his evil passions to conquer him, then he is no better than a mere animal.

*('Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, p. 60)*

## **Strive to Overcome Insistent Self**

O ye loved ones of God! In this, the Bahá'í dispensation, God's Cause is spirit unalloyed. His Cause belongeth not to the material world. It cometh neither for strife nor war, nor for acts of mischief or of shame; it is neither for quarrelling with other Faiths, nor for conflicts with the nations. Its only army is the love of God, its only joy the clear wine of His knowledge, its only battle the expounding of the Truth; its one crusade is against the insistent self, the evil

promptings of the human heart. Its victory is to submit and yield, and to be selfless is its everlasting glory.

*(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, p. 256)*

## **Investigate Reality and Look for True Remedy**

Now it is enough! We must investigate reality. We must put away these superstitions. It is a self-evident truth that all humanity is the creation of God. All are His servants and under His protection. All are recipients of His bestowals. God is kind to all His servants. At most it is this: that some are ignorant; they must be educated in order that they may become intelligent. Some are immature as children; they must be aided and assisted in order that they may become mature. Some are sick and ailing; they must be healed. But the suffering patient must not be tested by false treatment. The child must not be warped and hindered in its development. The ignorant must not be restricted by censure and criticism. We must look for the real, true remedy.

*(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 40)*

## **Removal of Imperfections Is Gradual Process**

What is needed is excellence of character and conduct, and compliance with the laws revealed by Bahá'u'lláh—these are the magnets that attract divine confirmation, and the means of establishing the validity and uniqueness of the Cause of the All-Glorious.

The removal of imperfections is a gradual process. Constant advice and admonition are necessary so that, step by step, the community may make good the various deficiencies that beset it and run its affairs on a planned and orderly basis.

*(Shoghi Effendi, Trustworthiness, pp. 352-53)*

## **Individual Can Acquire Skills Needed to Change**

Communication free of violence, coercion and manipulation is essential for the maintenance of healthy interpersonal relationships. Being an effective communicator in interpersonal relationships requires the ability to identify one's own feelings and the assertiveness to express them in ways that do not injure others. Many individuals who abuse are inexperienced at identifying feelings or too passive to express them directly, 'stuffing' feelings until they explode rather than being assertive, direct, and respectful in the expression of them. Often they feel that the only choice is to be dominant or a 'doormat,' or, in other words, either to be completely in control or to be walked upon, leading to a constant quest for control of others, a quest which usually finds its fullest expression within the relative security of the family. However, the skills and tools needed to identify and express feelings and to change abusive patterns of behavior can be acquired with training, effort and guidance.

## **Assist Person Who Abuses to Seek Professional Counseling**

The Assembly should assist the person who abuses to obtain appropriate anger management counseling and/or join an offender treatment program. Good counseling programs assist abusers to become accountable and responsible for their behavior through confrontation and support for change with the assistance of trained facilitators, peers, and professional therapists in a safe and confidential environment. In cases of abuse involving addictions, including sexual addiction, treatment by specialists in behavioral addictions may be advisable.<sup>[26]</sup>

## **All Who Abuse Do Not Fit Same Mold**

All those who abuse do not fit the same mold. While some are extremely resistant to intervention or treatment others may be able to accept responsibility for their behavior. Some individuals who abuse may live with acute, and often hidden, feelings of shame and self-loathing. Despite the suffering they bring to others, they may be in need of compassion and forgiveness themselves and may hope for rehabilitation with intervention and assistance. These individuals would be in need of a supportive, loving, non-judgmental community as they strive to overcome abusive behaviors. However, this should not be interpreted to mean that an individual who abuses may shift responsibility for any lack of progress to his or her family members, community, or Bahá'í administrative institutions.

## **Encourage Participation in Bahá'í Men's or Women's Group**

While Bahá'í men's or women's groups cannot substitute for treatment programs, if there is a Bahá'í men's or women's group in the area and if the Assembly determines it will not involve further risk to any party, it may encourage the abuser to join the gender appropriate group for the benefit of regular social contact with other Bahá'ís who are seeking to identify themselves ever more fully with the precepts of the Faith. According to Bahá'u'lláh:

O MY SON! The company of the ungodly increaseth sorrow, whilst fellowship with the righteous cleanseth the rust from off the heart. He that seeketh to commune with God, let him betake himself to the companionship of His loved ones; and he that desireth to hearken unto the word of God, let him give ear to the words of His chosen ones.

*(Bahá'u'lláh, The Hidden Words, Persian no. 56)*

## **Encourage Bahá'í Education**

If the administrative rights of an individual who has abused are not restricted, the Assembly may wish to encourage him or her to participate in Bahá'í deepenings, study circles, institutes, and school programs to promote greater understanding of the Bahá'í life with all its privileges, benefits, and responsibilities.

However, depending on the level of recovery of the individual and the existence of protective orders, discretion should be used in arranging participation with others in the community, particularly in any activity that would customarily include the abused party or parties. The Assembly will wish to take the following guidance from the Universal House of Justice into consideration when planning events, recognizing that a civil order of protection or restraint (refer to "Safety First" in the Protect the Abused section) would take precedence over Bahá'í administrative rights:

You have asked whether it is permissible for an individual in whose home a meeting sponsored by the Local Spiritual Assembly is held to stipulate which Bahá'ís cannot attend. ... Clearly, a distinction must be made between functions sponsored for the benefit of the community by a Bahá'í institution and those which are initiated by individuals at their own discretion. It is, of course, unacceptable that any believer in good standing should be refused admission to a community function sponsored by a Bahá'í institution, whether it is held in the home of one of the believers or in some other place. In deciding on the venue for a community event, the sponsoring institution should maintain this understanding. Whom a person chooses to invite to his or her home at his or her own initiative is, of course, a personal right.

*(E-mail written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, dated August 18, 2002)*

## **Possible Loss of Rights for Abusive Behavior**

### **Abusive Behavior May Result in Deprivation of Bahá'í Administrative Rights**

Violent or abusive behavior is a serious violation of Bahá'í law. Depending upon the circumstances, the National Spiritual Assembly may apply the sanction of removing an offender's Bahá'í administrative rights.

If the husband is also a Bahá'í, the Local Spiritual Assembly can bring to his attention the need to avoid abusive behavior and can, if necessary, take firmer measures to compel him to conform to the admonitions of the Teachings.

*(Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, dated April 12, 1990)*

### **Potential for Deprivation of Bahá'í Parental Rights**

Bahá'u'lláh has placed great emphasis on the duties of parents toward their children, and He has urged children to have gratitude in their hearts for their parents, whose good pleasure they should strive to win as a means of pleasing God Himself. However, He has indicated that under certain circumstances, the parents could be deprived of the right of parenthood as a consequence of their actions. The Universal House of Justice has the right to legislate on this matter. It has decided for the present that all cases should be referred to it in which the conduct or character of a parent appears to render him unworthy of having such parental rights as that of giving consent to marriage. Such questions could arise, for example, when a parent has committed incest, or when the child was conceived as a consequence of rape, and also when a parent consciously fails to protect the child from flagrant sexual abuse.

*(Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, dated January 24, 1993)*

### **Legal Parental Rights May Be Terminated by Civil Courts**

Parents who are found guilty of abusing or neglecting their children may also be subject to termination of their legal parental rights through the civil courts. Laws governing these matters vary from state to state.

## **Report to National Spiritual Assembly**

[Refer also to Chapter 15, Application of Bahá'í Law, in *Developing Distinctive Bahá'í Communities: Guidelines for Spiritual Assemblies.*]

### **Report Domestic Violence to National Assembly**

The National Assembly wishes to be informed of incidents of domestic violence within its jurisdiction, whether or not they result in criminal conviction, civil penalties, or a recommendation for Bahá'í administrative sanctions. However, unsubstantiated allegations need not be reported (refer to "When Allegations Are False or Unsubstantiated" in the Investigate the Facts section).

If there is no Local Spiritual Assembly in an area where domestic violence occurs, the National Spiritual Assembly should be informed and may assign a Local Assembly to handle the matter. In specific cases, it may ask a Local Assembly to provide periodic status reports on cases under its jurisdiction or to which it has been assigned.

In situations where the civil authorities are involved, the Assembly will not generally come to a final administrative decision until the civil or criminal investigation and any court proceedings are complete. In cases where the outcome of the investigation or court proceedings is not clear (for example, if there is

insufficient legal evidence to try the case or to compel a conviction) or is unduly delayed, the Assembly may still have reason to believe that misconduct occurred and that the accused is still a danger. In such situations, the Assembly should convey its views to the National Assembly, supported by whatever documentation it has, and recommend whatever administrative actions it feels are appropriate.

### **Decision to Publicize Sex Offense Rests with National Assembly**

Only the National Spiritual Assembly should take the action of publishing or announcing to the Bahá'í community that an individual is a sex offender. A Local Spiritual Assembly should not make such announcements or publish such information in local bulletins unless the National Assembly has instructed it to do so. In its consideration of the facts and circumstances of each case, the National Assembly will determine whether a public statement about the offender is warranted. If the Local Spiritual Assembly believes that such information should be conveyed to other individuals, its community or to a neighboring Assembly, it should seek the guidance of the National Assembly before taking any action.

### **Recommendations for Administrative Sanctions**

In all cases involving the possible removal or restoration of a believer's administrative rights, the Local Spiritual Assembly should forward a recommendation to the National Spiritual Assembly with reasons for the recommendation and all necessary background for the case. A report to the National Spiritual Assembly should include the following:

- A statement defining the problem, including individuals' names and Bahá'í identification numbers.
- A chronological list of all relevant facts and events.
- Details of charges and sentencing should be included in all cases involving violation of civil law where there have been arrests and/or convictions. Newspaper clippings showing name and date of publication should be attached, if available. (Refer also to “Maintain Accurate Records and Ensure Confidentiality” in the Investigate the Facts section.)
- A brief summary of the case, including all actions undertaken by the Local Spiritual Assembly.
- The Assembly's recommendation of a course of action and the rationale for it. Failure to include a recommendation may delay the handling of the case.

After reviewing the report, the National Assembly may ask the Local Assembly for further information before making a decision.

Recommendations for administrative sanctions may range from partial to full deprivation of administrative rights and may include, but are not limited to, a requirement to promptly report any change of locality to the institutions of the Faith, restrictions on a believer's unsupervised contact with children or youth in Bahá'í activities, and restrictions on the privilege of representing the Faith publicly or being appointed to a position in which the person would be viewed as a role model in the Bahá'í community.

### **Appeals and Restoration of Administrative Rights**

Procedures for appealing the National Spiritual Assembly's decisions and for restoring administrative rights may be found in Chapter 15 of *Developing Distinctive Bahá'í Communities: Guidelines for Spiritual Assemblies*.

## **Support Families**

### **Foster Spirit of Loving Support for Families**

Overcoming domestic violence requires developing an environment in the community in which abusive behavior is not tolerated, in which individuals are sensitive to the warning signs of abuse, in which no individuals or families are so isolated that they have no one to turn to in times of difficulty, and in which there is a “spirit of loving encouragement and support to families ...”<sup>[27]</sup>

### **Engage Community in Family Development**

While preserving the confidentiality of specific situations, Assemblies should engage the assistance of the Bahá'í community in developing family life activities for community members of all ages by encouraging friendships, mentoring, peer support, role-modeling and community activities that offer a framework within which spiritual, social and educational development of all families may take place.

### **Marriage and Family Is Bedrock Structure of Human Society**

The Bahá'í teachings ... center on marriage and the family as the bedrock of the whole structure of human society and are designed to protect and strengthen that divine institution.

*(The Universal House of Justice, Notes, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p. 223)*

### **Unity of Family Must Be Sustained**

According to the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh the family, being a human unit, must be educated according to the rules of sanctity. All the virtues must be taught the family. The integrity of the family bond must be constantly considered, and the rights of the individual members must not be transgressed. The rights of the son, the father, the mother - none of them must be transgressed, none of them must be arbitrary. Just as the son has certain obligations to his father, the father, likewise, has certain obligations to his son. The mother, the sister and other members of the household have their certain prerogatives. All these rights and prerogatives must be conserved, yet the unity of the family must be sustained. The 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.

*(Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 168)*

### **Abuse Is Antithesis of Unity**

Unity is created and maintained through cooperation, consultation, mutual consideration and respect, not through coercion, threats, and abuse. As the Universal House of Justice has written, “abuse of any kind, whether emotional, mental or physical ... is the very antithesis of the relationship of mutual respect and equality enjoined by the Bahá'í writings ...” For a husband to “beat his wife, or subject her to any form of cruel treatment ... would be an unacceptable abuse of the marriage relationship ...” The Universal House of Justice considers it a “matter of fundamental importance” that “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.” (See these quotations in full in the Bahá'í Laws, Principles and Exhortations Applying to Domestic Violence section.)

## **Abuse May Lead to Estrangement, Separation or Divorce**

Given the value of marriage as a divine institution, Bahá'ís should make great efforts to create, preserve and strengthen healthy marriages, drawing upon the power of prayer and spiritual transformation, learning to consult, seeking guidance in the Bahá'í Writings, exploring creative solutions to problems, and requesting assistance from Bahá'í institutions and/or professional counselors as necessary. Knowing the spiritual value of the effort to overcome difficulties in close personal relationships, Bahá'ís should not readily give up on a marriage or family relationship. At the same time, respect for the institution of marriage does not justify ignoring abuse, failing to assist someone who is suffering abuse, or failing to call to account one who is perpetrating abuse.

There are situations in which the behavior of some family member(s) jeopardizes the physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual health and well-being of others to such an extent, and there is so little indication that the abusive behavior will abate, that there may be no other recourse than for the abused party or parties to withdraw from the destructive relationship, temporarily or indefinitely. Although individuals should strive to be forgiving and forbearing for whatever injuries were inflicted in the past, no one is obliged to submit to further abuse. (See also “Decision to Leave Can Only be Made by Victim” in Protect the Abused section, and “Why People Stay in Abusive Relationships” in Definition of Domestic Violence section.)

Such an attitude (forgiveness and insight into their actions) does not preclude your being prudent in deciding upon the appropriate amount of contact with your parents. In reaching your decision you should be guided by such factors as their degree of remorse over what they inflicted on you in the past, the extent of their present involvement in practices which are contrary to the Bahá'í teachings, and the level of vulnerability you perceive within yourself to being influenced adversely by them. In the process of reaching a decision, you may find it useful to seek the advice of professionals such as your therapist.

*(Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, dated September 9, 1992)*

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 lead to a condition of irreconcilable antipathy.

*(Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, dated January 24, 1993)*

(For information regarding Bahá'í divorce, see Chapter 17 of *Developing Distinctive Bahá'í Communities*.)

## **Challenge to Preserve Unity and Develop Spiritual Patterns of Family Life**

One of the heavy responsibilities of an Assembly is to assist families recovering from past abuses or struggling to stay together despite existing patterns of abuse, which may vary widely in kind and degree, to develop spiritual patterns of family life and to create as much unity as possible. As marriage and family are the bedrock of human society, the Assembly will wish neither for a family to hold together to conceal abuse, nor to dissolve its bonds if there are means to preserve them while protecting the safety and well-being of its members.

## **Appoint Representative or Task Force to Respond to Special Needs**

The Assembly may wish to appoint a representative or task force to keep in close contact with and respond to the special needs of families and individuals coping with or recovering from situations of domestic violence. This may reduce the degree of isolation experienced by the family. Individuals or families struggling with the complex emotional and relationship issues resulting from abuse by family members should never be the subject of backbiting, gossip or judgment by others. As representatives of the Assembly, appointees would be required to uphold the same high standards of confidentiality as the

Assembly with regard to sensitive personal matters and should become thoroughly familiar with the contents of this supplement.

### **Auxiliary Board May Perform Vital Supporting Role**

Auxiliary Board members and their assistants may perform a vital role in providing guidance and encouragement to both individuals and Assemblies, particularly with respect to community functioning and supporting those affected by domestic violence.

### **Be Sensitive to Differing Needs of Individuals and Families in Distress**

It can be difficult to understand what to do to help families or individuals in distress. Families already separated by domestic violence will need a different kind of assistance than families struggling to hold themselves together in spite of it. When attempting to assist families, the Assembly should bear in mind the particular circumstances and needs of each family. The experiences of every family are different and the experiences of each person in a family differ from one another. Each member of a family affected by domestic abuse needs age appropriate support for her or his own particular experience. The Assembly should be aware that the need for assistance in a variety of forms may continue over a prolonged period of time.

Assemblies should be sensitive to the particular structure and background culture of each family (refer to “Ethnic and Cultural Sensitivity Issues” in the Special Considerations section). There are many variations, other than the Western nuclear family model, on how families may be structured. Some variations include families where the in-laws live in the same residence with the family. In others, extended families may live close-by but not in the same household or unit, with much coming and going through doors that are always open or unlocked. In addition, there may be stepfamilies, foster families, grandparent-headed households where neither parent is present, or other combinations of relatives or others living in the same household.

The Assembly should strive to be understanding and supportive concerning the position of each individual in the family, and recognize that expectations of behavior for different members, depending on their position in the family, may differ from culture to culture. When all members of a household are of the same cultural background, they often share the same assumptions concerning the roles of family members. These assumptions may be similar to or different from those held by members of the Assembly.

### **Assembly Should Not Assume Role of Therapist**

In every aspect of offering assistance to families or individuals, the Assembly must always bear in mind that it cannot, and must not, try to assume the role of therapist for which it is neither mandated nor equipped. It may be helpful, in some circumstances, for the Assembly to provide general information to a therapist about the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith and its guidance on domestic violence.

### **Spiritual Transformation Is Primary Means of Progress**

In addition to the requirement for individuals with abusive behavior patterns to assume responsibility for their actions and to engage in programs for transformation of their behaviors, the importance of individual and collective spiritual transformation in families cannot be overemphasized as a primary means of progress in establishing spiritual patterns of family life. Bahá'u'lláh has stated that the purpose of religious revelation is to cause a positive change in the character of every person:

Is not the object of every Revelation to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself both outwardly and inwardly, that shall



affect both its inner life and external conditions? For if the character of mankind be not changed, the futility of God's universal Manifestations would be apparent.

*(Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Iqán, p. 240)*

## **Every Soul Created Noble and Capable of Transformation**

Bahá'u'lláh assures every soul of having been created noble and that it can, through the grace and aid of God and its own efforts, rise to the state of nobility for which it was created, no matter what its present state. It is this intrinsic quality of nobility that ensures the capacity of souls to transform:

O SON OF SPIRIT! Noble have I created thee, yet thou hast abased thyself. Rise then unto that for which thou wast created.

*(Bahá'u'lláh, The Hidden Words, Arabic no. 22)*

Assemblies may wish to encourage families to understand and remember that the inherent nobility of human souls to rise to the challenges of transformation offers hope of overcoming every problem. Assemblies may also wish to bear in mind that there are reciprocal effects on relationships and opportunities for development within the family as individual members traverse stages of transformation.

## **Essential Qualities for Transformation of Families**

Qualities that stand out as fundamental and essential for success in rebuilding damaged family relationships include truthfulness and trustworthiness, supported by love, respect, and courtesy.

According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, a lack of truthfulness renders progress impossible:

Truthfulness, He asserts, "is the foundation of all human virtues. Without truthfulness progress and success, in all the worlds of God, are impossible for any soul. When this holy attribute is established in man, all the divine qualities will also be acquired."

*('Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted by Shoghi Effendi in The Advent of Divine Justice, p. 26)*

Bahá'u'lláh has explained that stability, tranquility and security depend upon trustworthiness:

The fourth Taráz concerneth trustworthiness. Verily it is the door of security for all that dwell on earth and a token of glory on the part of the All-Merciful. He who partaketh thereof hath indeed partaken of the treasures of wealth and prosperity. Trustworthiness is the greatest portal leading unto the tranquility and security of the people. In truth the stability of every affair hath depended and doth depend upon it. All the domains of power, of grandeur and of wealth are illumined by its light.

*(Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 37)*

Love, respect, and courtesy are referred to by the Universal House of Justice as indispensable to successful spiritual relationships, which are a primary objective of family life. Spiritual love within a family binds the hearts of family members together and inspires and sustains them through every difficulty. Respect is essential in that it determines the fundamental attitude and demeanor of family members toward each other in their actions, speech, and expression of emotions, even of love. Various dictionaries record the antonyms of respect as abuse, misuse, and contempt, which imply that in the absence of respect some form of abuse is almost inevitable. Finally, the quality of courtesy is necessary to sustain civil exchanges in emotionally charged situations, which inevitably happen in the course of family life.

They must, in the first place, approach their joint responsibilities within the framework of the spiritual requisites for all successful Bahá'í relationships. Where love, respect and courtesy are genuinely and mutually expressed, estrangement finds no accommodation and problems become soluble challenges.

*(Letter from the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, dated May 19, 1994)*

## **Suggestions Assemblies May Find Useful in Assisting Families**

There are many strategies and approaches to assisting families in recovery from patterns of abuse. While the Assembly is encouraged to seek expert advice and must avoid assuming the role of therapist, it is free to devise its own approach for encouraging families to engage in spiritual transformation as well as developmental programs that will support their progress. Any suggestions an Assembly makes to families or individuals concerning possible strategies to increase unity are not a substitute for counseling or other therapeutic interventions. In offering suggestions, the Assembly will wish to be flexible and avoid a 'one-size fits all' approach.

Many useful programs are offered through locally based agencies and most counties offer programs designed to assist families with relational, behavioral, social and emotional problems. In addition, national organizations may offer local resources for mentoring and in-home help. Many community service organizations welcome volunteers and are receptive to establishing partnerships with local faith-based organizations to serve community needs. Assemblies may initiate partnerships to serve the needs of the Bahá'í community in collaboration with organizations that have a record of valuing relationships with small faith-based organizations. Individual Bahá'ís may also volunteer to participate in some of these programs to receive training and serve the needs of the Bahá'í community. Local contact information can be obtained through state child and family services offices or through the Web sites and other resources noted in the Resource List of National Support Organizations at the end of this supplement.

## **Children Are Most Precious Treasure of Community**

Children are the most precious treasure a community can possess, for in them are the promise and guarantee of the future. They bear the seeds of the character of future society which is largely shaped by what the adults constituting the community do or fail to do with respect to children. They are a trust no community can neglect with impunity. An all-embracing love of children, the manner of treating them, the quality of the attention shown them, the spirit of adult behavior toward them—these are all among the vital aspects of the requisite attitude. Love demands discipline, the courage to accustom children to hardship, not to indulge their whims or leave them entirely to their own devices. An atmosphere needs to be maintained in which children feel that they belong to the community and share in its purpose. They must lovingly but insistently be guided to live up to Bahá'í standards, to study and teach the Cause in ways that are suited to their circumstances.

*(Letter from the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World, Ridván 2000)*

## **World Is Laden with Moral Dangers and Harsh Realities for Children**

Our children need to be nurtured spiritually and to be integrated into the life of the Cause. They should not be left to drift in a world so laden with moral dangers ... It grieves our hearts to realize that in so many parts of the world children are employed as soldiers, exploited as laborers, sold into virtual slavery, forced into prostitution, made the objects of pornography, abandoned by parents centered on their own desires, and subjected to other forms of victimization too numerous to mention. Many such horrors are inflicted by the parents themselves upon their own children ...

It must be borne in mind, too, that children live in a world that informs them of harsh realities through direct experience with the horrors already described or through the unavoidable outpourings of the mass media. Many of them are thereby forced to mature prematurely, and among these are those who look for standards and discipline by which to guide their lives. Against this gloomy backdrop of a decadent society, Bahá'í children should shine as the emblems of a better future.

*(Letter from the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World, Ridván 2000)*

## **Support for Abused Children and Youth**

In addition to professional counseling and other interventions that may be provided, children and youth who have been abused need regular, loving and supportive interactions within the Bahá'í community, including social activities, spiritual education, and opportunities for service.

The Assembly may also wish to suggest tutors or mentors for abused children or youth. Mentoring helps young people rediscover trust in others and a sense of value in themselves, as well as providing role models for responsible and spiritual behavior. If suitable mentoring resources are not available within the Bahá'í community, they may be found through national or local organizations, some of which are noted in the Resource List of National Support Organizations at the end of this supplement. (Refer also to “Cautions for Child Abuse Cases” and “Child or Youth Victims Have Special Needs and Should Receive Counseling” in the Special Considerations section.)

## **Support for Single Parents with Dependent Families**

Single parents emerging from domestic violence situations may need heightened levels of support in many ways, in part because they often face either abandonment or hostility and threats from the absent parent. Such needs may include but are not limited to the following, some of which may also apply to single parents in general:

- The single parent may suffer from inadequate material resources, lack of skills and confidence, and the emotional support of a partner in parenting. The Assembly may wish to assist by encouraging access to whatever counseling or support services may be available, by ensuring that transportation to needed services or Bahá'í activities is available, and offering scholarships to Bahá'í conferences, schools and workshops.
- If there is a need for financial aid, newly single parents may be uninformed about what is available through town or city, county and state services. They may also be reticent to apply for it and the Assembly may wish to encourage and assist them to do so. The Assembly may point out that various avenues of public assistance have been established to aid people who are temporarily going through difficult financial times, and their proper use is not to be regarded as begging.
- Single parents often need training in how to be a single parent and how to interact effectively with the estranged parent, if there is voluntary or mandated contact, as well as education in what the needs of the children are in relation to the attitudes and behaviors of the parents.

There is a wide range of financial, training, mentoring, and assisting services available in many local communities, in addition to supports such as emergency food, utilities and rent/mortgage payment offered directly by towns and cities through their general assistance or relief offices.

It may be helpful if the Assembly follows up to be sure that needed support has been received. In some cases, there may be unexpected barriers to obtaining assistance, for example, ineligibility for services due to being marginally over income or lacking proof of income, which may occur when the abuser is the bread-winner and withholds necessary information or has neglected to file tax returns.

## **Support for Families with Elderly Members**

Assemblies may wish to encourage Bahá'ís with elderly family members in the home to take courses in how to care for elderly individuals. Many such courses will provide care-giving instructions as well as information about developmental losses in aging, which if not understood, may be a contributing factor in abuse.

Caregivers with the dual responsibilities of caring for both children and aging parents may experience high levels of stress. Assemblies may wish to suggest alternative care measures such as respite care, adult day care, and or homemaker services offered through local or national service organizations for families facing these kinds of pressures (refer to the Resource List of National Support Organizations). Visiting aids from some programs may assist through decreasing isolation, modeling communication

skills for other family members, and providing advocacy when needed. (Refer also to “Elderly Victims May Have Special Needs” in the Special Considerations section.)

When possible, elders in the community should be actively engaged in participating in the life of the community, their skills and experience recognized and valued in service. In many cases, it will be necessary to provide transportation for elders to participate in community activities. The Assembly should cultivate an awareness and habit in the community of ensuring that its elders are fully welcomed into its life, that their skills and experience are utilized to the extent possible in consultation and service, and that means of including them are made available on an outreach basis. Many older people will not ask for assistance but may appreciate being picked up and taken to community events, having regular visitors and companionship, assistance with home repairs, gardening, maintenance chores, and transportation to and from appointments and shopping, if their independent means are limited. These services are especially important if they have no family nearby who are attentive to their needs and could be a rewarding area of service for youth and others in the community. The Assembly may also wish to provide a mechanism for ensuring that regular telephone calls are made to elderly members of the community to decrease isolation and provide a regular means of checking on their well-being.

### **When Situation Does Not Resolve Favorably**

Assemblies should be aware that some situations of domestic abuse will not resolve favorably even after all avenues for protection and remediation have been explored. Threats may continue to exist over extended periods of time and family members may be faced with continuing uncertainty, apprehension, and fears for safety. Among the ways to strengthen individuals to deal with such situations is to encourage and assist them to do whatever is realistically possible to remedy the situation according to the guidance in this supplement, and then to turn their hearts to God and trust in Him for, in the end, the lives of all people are in God's hands:

He does not feel that fear - for ourselves or for others - solves any problem, or enables us to better meet it if it ever does arise. We do not know what the future holds exactly, or how soon we may all pass through another ordeal worse than the last one.

But what we do know is that all we can do as Bahá'ís is to teach and to exemplify the Faith. We cannot bear the burden of suffering of others, and we should not try to. All men are in God's hands, and even if they do get killed we know there is another life beyond this than can hold great hope and happiness for the soul.

No matter what happens, nothing is as important as our feeling of trust in God, our inner peacefulness and faith that all, in the end, in spite of the severity of the ordeals we may pass through, will come out as Bahá'u'lláh has promised.

He urges you to put these dark thoughts from your mind, and remember that if God, the Creator of all men, can bear to see them suffer so, it is not for us to question His wisdom. He can compensate the innocent, in His own way, for the afflictions they bear.

*(Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, dated September 30, 1950)*

In such situations, when the Assembly has done what it can in other ways, it should not hesitate to continue to remember the family in its prayers, as this may prove to be a source of special assistance and great comfort to those involved.

### **On the Mystery of Suffering**

Assemblies should be sensitive to the fact that suffering brought about by domestic abuse or violence encompasses not only that inflicted directly on victims, but also the anguish of other family members concerning both injury to victims and the reprehensible actions of loved ones who abuse, the distress of those who witness abuse directly or indirectly, and the inner torment of offenders. Those who are faced with such tests often try to understand why and how such things occur. The Bahá'í Writings provide

assurance that there is meaning and wisdom in suffering, although we may not always understand it. Shoghi Effendi explains it as follows:

As to your question concerning the meaning of physical suffering and its relation to mental and spiritual healing. Physical pain is a necessary accompaniment of all human existence, and as such is unavoidable. As long as there will be life on earth, there will be also suffering, in various forms and degrees. But suffering, although an inescapable reality, can nevertheless be utilised as a means for the attainment of happiness. This is the interpretation given to it by all the prophets and saints who, in the midst of severe tests and trials, felt happy and joyous and experienced what is best and holiest in life. Suffering is both a reminder and a guide. It stimulates us better to adapt ourselves to our environmental conditions, and thus leads the way to self-improvement. In every suffering one can find a meaning and a wisdom. But it is not always easy to find the secret of that wisdom. It is sometimes only when all our suffering has passed that we become aware of its usefulness. What man considers to be evil turns often to be a cause of infinite blessings. And this is due to his desire to know more than he can. God's wisdom is, indeed, inscrutable to us all, and it is no use pushing too far trying to discover that which shall always remain a mystery to our mind.

*(Shoghi Effendi, Unfolding Destiny, p. 434)*

'Abdu'l-Bahá offers the encouragement that suffering and self-sacrifice can purify and advance the mind and spirit and lead to the attainment of eternal happiness, and that when an individual turns to God and draws upon his or her higher nature in facing difficult tests the soul will progress. He also warns that should the individual turn to his or her lower nature in response to the test there will be retrogression:

Does the soul progress more through sorrow or through the joy in this world? '

'Abdu'l-Bahá - 'The mind and spirit of man advance when he is tried by suffering. The more the ground is ploughed the better the seed will grow, the better the harvest will be. Just as the plough furrows the earth deeply, purifying it of weeds and thistles, so suffering and tribulation free man from the petty affairs of this worldly life until he arrives at a state of complete detachment. His attitude in this world will be that of divine happiness. Man is, so to speak, unripe: the heat of the fire of suffering will mature him. Look back to the times past and you will find that the greatest men have suffered most.

'He who through suffering has attained development, should he fear happiness?'

'Abdu'l-Bahá - 'Through suffering he will attain to an eternal happiness which nothing can take from him. The apostles of Christ suffered: they attained eternal happiness.'

'Then it is impossible to attain happiness without suffering?'

'Abdu'l-Bahá - 'To attain eternal happiness one must suffer. He who has reached the state of self-sacrifice has true joy. Temporal joy will vanish.'

*(Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, pp. 178-79)*

The souls who bear the tests of God become the manifestations of great bounties; for the divine trials cause some souls to become entirely lifeless, while they cause the holy souls to ascend to the highest degree of love and solidity. They cause progress and they also cause retrogression.

*(Abdu'l-Bahá, Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Vol. 2, p.324)*

As to the subject of babes and infants and weak ones who are afflicted by the hands of oppressors: This contains great wisdom and this subject is of paramount importance. In brief, for those souls there is a recompense in another world and many details are connected with this matter. For those souls that suffering is the greatest mercy of God. Verily that mercy of the Lord is far better and preferable to all the comfort of this world and the growth and development of this place of mortality. If it be the will of God, when thou shalt be present this will be explained in detail by word of mouth.

*(Abdu'l-Bahá, Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Vol. 2, p. 337, cited in Star of the West, Vol. 9, p. 101)*

Recognizing that suffering may be the cause of spiritual development is never a justification for

inflicting or ignoring abuse, failing to assist those who are suffering abuse, or failing to call to account one who is perpetrating abuse. But for those who have suffered abuse and are struggling to rebuild unity, to heal or transform themselves and their relationships, or to continue on in the face of intractable difficulties, it may be a source of courage and solace to know that such trials provide the opportunity for spiritual progress.

## **Wisdom Attained May Prevent Future Suffering**

The present condition of society, with its high rates of divorce and of violence in the family, is inextricably related to its inevitable transition to a more just and unified world. To the extent that humanity resists and delays its spiritual evolution towards unity, equality, and justice, the suffering brought about by its own waywardness will continue. As patterns of behavior in families become increasingly conducive to the spiritual happiness of their members by incorporating greater justice, equality and unity, society will inevitably reflect those changes through greater security, stability and peace. According to Bahá'u'lláh:

The All-Knowing Physician hath His finger on the pulse of mankind. He perceiveth the disease, and prescribeth, in His unerring wisdom, the remedy. Every age hath its own problem, and every soul its particular aspiration. The remedy the world needeth in its present-day afflictions can never be the same as that which a subsequent age may require. Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements.

*(Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 213)*

Overcoming domestic violence is one of the urgent needs of this age and the suffering resulting from it may become the cause of seeking spiritual solutions to the problems of society and of striving with heart and soul to understand and apply those solutions to prevent further suffering. The hard-won wisdom such suffering and searching bring to the development of individuals, families communities, and institutions may be one of the most precious fruits of the mystery of suffering, inspiring and motivating the struggle towards creating healthier families for a happier and more peaceful world.

The tasks facing the believers everywhere are great, for they see only too clearly that the only permanent remedy for the many afflictions the world is suffering from, is a change of heart and a new pattern of not only thought but personal conduct.

*(Shoghi Effendi, Unfolding Destiny, p. 172)*

## **Educate the Community**

### **Far-reaching Implications in Education of Community**

Within every family, every community, and every society, each successive generation has the opportunity to learn from the successes and failures of the preceding generations and to discard or improve patterns of behavior. This is one of the fundamental factors in the advancement of society and is part of the purpose of education. The role of Spiritual Assemblies in this process has far-reaching implications for both the Bahá'í community and the wider society, as they are responsible for the education of Bahá'í communities with respect to Bahá'í law and principle, and for the general enlightenment of the people.

## **Religion of God Guarantees Felicity of World of Mankind Through Education and Training**

And among the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh is that religion is a mighty bulwark. If the edifice of religion shakes and totters, commotion and chaos will ensue and the order of things will be

utterly upset, for in the world of mankind there are two safeguards that protect man from wrongdoing. One is the law which punishes the criminal; but the law prevents only the manifest crime and not the concealed sin; whereas the ideal safeguard, namely, the religion of God, prevents both the manifest and the concealed crime, trains man, educates morals, compels the adoption of virtues and is the all-inclusive power which guarantees the felicity of the world of mankind.

*(Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 302)*

## **Institute Systematic Education Programs on Gender Equality and Bahá'í Marriage**

The House of Justice suggests that your efforts to eliminate any traces of domestic violence from the Bahá'í community might well be founded on a systematic program to educate all elements of the Bahá'í community in the implications of the principle of the equality of men and women as set forth in the compilation on women . . . in 1986. Such an educative process focused on the status and role of women, as well as the positive aspects of the marriage relationship described in the Bahá'í teachings, would assist Bahá'í couples to construct marriages which are entirely devoid of abuse or violence, as well as psychological or emotional manipulation, and which are a model to a society searching for harmonious domestic relations.

*(Letter from the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United Kingdom, dated September 25, 1987)*

## **Spiritual Education of Children and Junior Youth of Paramount Importance**

Even though children's activities have been a part of past Plans, these have fallen short of the need. Spiritual education of children and junior youth are of paramount importance to the further progress of the community. It is therefore imperative that this deficiency be remedied. Institutes must be certain to include in their programs the training of teachers of children's classes, who can make their services available to local communities. But although providing spiritual and academic education for children is essential, this represents only a part of what must go into developing their characters and shaping their personalities. The necessity exists, too, for individuals and the institutions at all levels, which is to say the community as a whole, to show a proper attitude towards children and to take a general interest in their welfare. Such an attitude should be far removed from that of a rapidly declining order ...

Among the young ones in the community are those known as junior youth, who fall between the ages of, say, 12 and 15. They represent a special group with special needs as they are somewhat in between childhood and youth when many changes are occurring within them. Creative attention must be devoted to involving them in programs of activity that will engage their interests, mold their capacities for teaching and service, and involve them in social interaction with older youth. The employment of the arts in various forms can be of great value in such activity.

*(Letter from the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World, Ridván 2000)*

## **Educational Programs Should Reach Every Level of Community**

Programs concerning domestic violence should seek to reach every age group and ethnic population within the Bahá'í community through a variety of age appropriate and culturally sensitive delivery systems.

As part of the education of children and youth, they should learn that it is important for them to tell any responsible older person when someone has done something that feels wrong or frightens them, that such telling is not tattling, backbiting or gossiping, and that they have a right to be protected from the

misbehavior of others. Children and youth should be enabled to initiate intervention for their own protection and should feel that they are surrounded by a loving and caring Bahá'í community. At the same time, and not in such manner as might deter a child or youth from making a valid report, they must understand the serious consequences of making a false report. This, like so much else on the issue of child abuse, requires careful and delicate consideration.

## **Suggestions for Assemblies**

Some suggested avenues through which Assemblies may seek to eliminate domestic violence are outlined below. For details on how to obtain any of the materials listed please see the resource section which follows.

- Disseminate knowledge of the National Spiritual Assembly's policies on domestic violence.
- Develop Assembly awareness, knowledge and skills in handling domestic violence by participating in the Assembly Development Module Workshop on domestic violence: "*Loving Shepherds of the Multitudes: Advanced Practice in Administering Justice Focus on Domestic Violence.*"
- Educate the community about domestic violence: Its definitions and cycles, connection to gender inequality, impact on society at large, and resources available to prevent and counter it. This may be done by providing the community with copies of materials produced by local domestic violence programs, law enforcement agencies, and courts, having these organizations make presentations, and by utilizing educational materials for the community which are released by the National Spiritual Assembly.
- Promote attendance at marriage enrichment and preparation programs and workshops at Bahá'í schools and sponsor workshops on this topic in the local area. The Core Curriculum materials contain workshops on this topic both for married couples and for singles preparing themselves for marriage.
- Promote gender equality. Workshops on this topic are available from two sources: 1) Office of Assembly Development workshops "*Builders of Communities: The Equality of Women and Men, Part One: A Shared Responsibility*" and "*Builders of Communities: The Equality of Women and Men, Part Two: The Assembly's Role in Fostering Partnership,*" and 2) the Core Curriculum program.
- Promote development of Bahá'í consultation skills. Two workshops on this topic are available from the Office of Assembly Development: "*Channels of Divine Guidance: Consultation, Part One: Developing the Requisites of Consultation*" and "*Channels of Divine Guidance: Consultation, Part Two: Consulting in Unity and Harmony.*"
- Promote acquisition of virtues and character development. Materials on this topic are available in *The Family Virtues Guide* and from the Core Curriculum program.
- Offer workshops and counseling on constructive approaches to handling anger, frustrations and disagreements. Many materials are available on this topic from publicly available sources.
- Encourage participation in assertiveness training, anger management, and other self-help, esteem and skill building programs offered locally. Many materials are available on this topic from publicly available sources.
- Encourage the formation of separate men's and women's study groups to discuss the attitudes and behaviors of their gender, how these are formed and influenced in families, play yards, schools, workplaces, and communities, as well as which attitudes and behaviors are in keeping with Bahá'í teachings and standards of conduct and which are not.
- Promote knowledge about education of children, spiritual parenting practices, and what resources are available on these topics. For information on these resources contact the National Education and Schools office or the National Teacher Training Center at Louhelen Bahá'í School.
- Promote better understanding of the relationships between individuals and Bahá'í institutions and encourage individuals to turn to the institutions for help. A workshop on this topic is available from



the Office of Assembly Development: *A Sense of Partnership: The Individual and the Local Spiritual Assembly.*

- Educate Assembly members about Assembly functioning and responsibilities through use of Office of Assembly Development deepening modules, workshops, and other materials. Contact the Office of Assembly Development for details.
- Promote increased understanding and acceptance of the benefits of professional counseling and other resources outside the Bahá'í community.

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## **Bahá'í Resources and References on Related Topics**

### **Compilations, Guidance and Statements from Bahá'í Institutions**

Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice, *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File*, 6th ed., compiled by Helen Bassett Hornby, (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust of India, 1999). \*\*

Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice, *Women: Extracts from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice*, compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice (Thornhill, Ontario: Bahá'í Canada Publications, 1986). \*\*

Universal House of Justice, letter written on its behalf to an individual believer concerning domestic violence (Haifa: Bahá'í World Center, January 24, 1993). Published in *The American Bahá'í*, November 23, 1993 and January 19, 2002 (Evanston, IL: National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, 1993 and 2002). [Also available at the Administrative Web Site of the Bahá'ís of the United States under Community Administration, Domestic Violence.]

Bahá'í International Community, *Creating Violence-Free Families: Summary Report of Symposium on Strategies for Creating Violence-Free Families*, available on-line at <http://www.bic-un.bahai.org/94-0526.htm>. (New York: Bahá'í International Community, May 1994). [Symposium co-sponsored by Bahá'í International Community, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM)].

Australian National Bahá'í Community Development Committee and Australian National Marriage and Family Development Committee, *A Bahá'í Parenting Programme* (Mona Vale, NSW: National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia, 1990). \*\*

National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia, *Local Spiritual Assembly Handbook*, 3rd ed. (Mona Vale, NSW: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 1996). \*\*

National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of New Zealand, *Violence in Marriage: A Statement on Violence* (Auckland: National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of New Zealand, October 1995).

National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, *Developing Distinctive Bahá'í Communities: Guidelines for Spiritual Assemblies*, 1998 ed. [or later] (Evanston, IL: Office of Assembly Development of the National Spiritual Assembly, 1998). [Also available at the Administrative Web Site of the Bahá'ís of the United States under Community Administration, Office of Assembly Development.]

National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, *Marriage: A Fortress for Well-Being* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1984). \*\*

National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, *Two Wings of a Bird: the Equality of Women and Men* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1997). \*\*

### **Institutional Web Sites with Related Information**

Administrative Web Site of the Bahá'ís of the United States: <http://www.usbnc.org/> (Evanston, IL: National Spiritual Assembly). [Access information on domestic violence by clicking on NSA Departments, then on Community Administration, Domestic Violence.]

Bahá'í International Community Statement Library: <http://www.bic-un.bahai.org/> (Haifa, Geneva, and New York: The Bahá'í International Community). [The Bahá'í International Community is a non-governmental organization associated with the United Nations].

Bahá'í Network on Aids, Sexuality, Addictions, and Abuse: <http://www.bnasaa.org/> (Thornhill, ON: BNASAA Coordinating Committee of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada).

Bahá'í Office of Public Information Web Site: <http://www.us.bahai.org/equality/wings.html> (Evanston, IL: National Spiritual Assembly). [An on-line copy of this supplement is available here, as well as the full text of the National Assembly's statement on equality.]

Louhelen Bahá'í School National Teacher Training Download Center: <http://www.louhelen.org/nttc/downloads/index.htm#ADM> (Evanston, IL: National Spiritual Assembly).

### **Publications by Individuals**

Blumenthal, Erik, *Peace With Your Partner* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1992). \*\*

Danesh, Hossein B., *The Violence-Free Family: Building Block of a Peaceful Civilization* (Ottawa: Association for Bahá'í Studies, 1995). \*\*

Furútan, Alí-Akbar, *Mothers, Fathers, and Children: Practical Advice to Parents* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1980). \*\*

Khavari, Khalil A. and Sue Williston Khavari, *Creating a Successful Family* (London: Oneworld, c1989). \*\*

Peterson, Phyllis, *Assisting the Traumatized Soul: Healing the Wounded Talisman* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1999). \*\*

Popov, Linda Kavelin, Dan Popov, and John Kavelin, *The Family Virtues Guide: Simple Ways to Bring Out the Best In Our Children and Ourselves* (New York: Plume, 1997). \*\*

Radpour, Mary K., *Some Guidance for Spiritual Assemblies Related to Mental Illness and Its Treatment* (Chattanooga, TN: Images International, 1999). \*\*

Ruhe, Margaret, *Guidelines for Parents*, 3rd ed. (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust of India, 1989). \*\*

### **Trainings and Workshops**

Assembly Development Module Workshops, Office of Assembly Development, Bahá'í National Center, tel. (847) 733-3490. See module descriptions on the Administrative Web Site <http://www.usbnc.org/> under Community Administration, Office of Assembly Development. \*\*

- *Loving Shepherds of the Multitudes: Advanced Practice in Administering Justice Focus on Domestic Violence*
- *A Sense of Partnership: The Individual and the Local Spiritual Assembly*

- *Channels of Divine Guidance: Consultation Part One: Developing the Requisites of Consultation*
- *Channels of Divine Guidance: Consultation Part Two: Consulting in Unity and Harmony*
- *Builders of Communities: The Equality of Women and Men Part One: A Shared Responsibility*
- *Builders of Communities: The Equality of Women and Men Part Two: The Assembly's Role in Fostering Partnership*

Core Curriculum Training Programs, National Teacher Training Center, Louhelen Bahá'í Center, 3208 S. State Rd, Davison, MI, 810-653-5033. Course descriptions available on-line at <http://www.louhelen.org/nttc/index.htm>.\*\*

- Parenting workshops
- Marriage and Family Life workshops
- Equality Training
- The Fundamental Verities series
- Fireside workshops, especially “Family: Seeds of World Peace” and “Two Wings of a Bird: Equality of Women and Men.”
- Core Curriculum training for children's spiritual education

Ruhi Institute materials, Palabra Publications, 7369 Westport Pl, West Palm Beach, FL, tel. (561) 697-9823, <http://applemachine.com/palabrapublications>. \*\*

- Book 1: Reflections on the Life of the Spirit
- Book 3: Teaching Children's Classes, Grade 1

\*\* Available through the Bahá'í Distribution Service, 4703 Fulton Industrial Blvd, Atlanta, GA 30336-2017, tel. (404) 472- 9019, orders (800) 999-9019, fax ((404) 472-0119

Dial 911 or your local emergency number  
if you or someone you are with needs immediate assistance

## **Resource List of National Support Organizations**

The National Spiritual Assembly does not endorse specific organizations but the following is a partial list of well-known national organizations that offer a variety of services and resources. This list is not exhaustive and is intended only as a starting point for Local Spiritual Assemblies to compile resource lists of services in their own localities.

### **Domestic Violence Crisis Intervention and Information Organizations**

**National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-SAFE (7233) or TDD 1-800-787-3224**

**National Child Abuse Hotline (Child Help USA): 1-800-422-4453**

### **State Coalition List:**

To get help or give help call your State Coalition Office to find the program offering shelter and support nearest to you:

- **Alabama** Coalition Against Domestic Violence – (334) 832-4842
- **Alaska** Network on Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault – (907) 586-3650
- **Arizona** Coalition Against Domestic Violence – (602) 279-2900
- **Arkansas** Coalition Against Violence to Women & Children – (501) 812-0571
- **California** Alliance Against Domestic Violence – (916) 444-7163
- Statewide **California** Coalition for Battered Women – (888) 722-2952

- **Colorado** Coalition Against Domestic Violence – (303) 831-9632
- **Connecticut** Coalition Against Domestic Violence – (860) 282-7899
- **Delaware** Coalition Against Domestic Violence – (302) 658-2958
- **DC** Coalition Against Domestic Violence – (202) 783-5332
- **Florida** Coalition Against Domestic Violence – (850) 425-2749
- **Georgia** Coalition on Family Violence – (770) 984-0085
- **Georgia** Advocates for Battered Women and Children – (404) 524-3847
- **Hawaii** State Coalition Against Domestic Violence – (808) 486-5072
- **Idaho** Coalition Against Sexual and Domestic Violence – (208) 384-0419
- **Illinois** Coalition Against Domestic Violence – (217) 789-2830
- **Indiana** Coalition Against Domestic Violence – (317) 543-3908
- **Iowa** Coalition Against Domestic Violence – (515) 244-8028
- **Kansas** Coalition Against Sexual & Domestic Violence – (785) 232-9784
- **Kentucky** Domestic Violence Association – (502) 695-2444
- **Louisiana** Coalition Against Domestic Violence – (504) 752-1296
- **Maine** Coalition for Family Crisis Services – (207) 941-1194
- **Maryland** Network Against Domestic Violence – (301) 352-4574
- **Massachusetts** Coalition of Battered Women's Service Groups – (617) 248-0922
- **Michigan** Coalition Against Domestic Violence – (517) 347-7000
- **Minnesota** Coalition for Battered Women – (612) 646-6177
- **Mississippi** Coalition Against Domestic Violence – (601) 981-9196
- **Missouri** Coalition Against Domestic Violence – (573) 634-4161
- **Montana** Coalition Against Domestic Violence – (406) 443-7794
- **Nebraska** Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Coalition – (402) 476-6256
- **Nevada** Network Against Domestic Violence – (702) 828-1115
- **New Hampshire** Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence – (603) 224-8893
- **New Jersey** Coalition for Battered Women – (609) 584-8107
- **New Mexico** State Coalition Against Domestic Violence – (505) 246-9240
- **New York** State Coalition Against Domestic Violence – (518) 432-4864
- **North Carolina** Coalition Against Domestic Violence – (919) 956-9124
- **North Dakota** Council on Abused Women's Services – (701) 255-6240
- **Ohio** Domestic Violence Network – (614) 784-0023
- **Action Ohio** Coalition for Battered Women – (614) 221-1255
- **Oklahoma** Coalition on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault – (405) 848-1815
- **Oregon** Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence – (503) 365-9644
- **Pennsylvania** Coalition Against Domestic Violence – (717) 545-6400 <http://www.pcadv.org>
- **Puerto Rico**, Comision Para Los Asuntos De La Mujer – (787) 722-2907
- **Rhode Island** Council on Domestic Violence – (401) 467-9940
- **South Carolina** Coalition Against Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault – (803) 256-2900
- **South Dakota** Coalition Against Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault – (605) 945-0869
- **Tennessee** Task Force Against Family Violence – (615) 386-9406
- **Texas** Council on Family Violence – (512) 794-1133
- **Utah** Domestic Violence Advisory Council – (801) 538-9886
- **Vermont** Network Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault – (802) 223-1302
- **Virginians** Against Domestic Violence – (757) 221-0990
- **Washington** State Coalition Against Domestic Violence – (360) 407-0756
- **West Virginia** Coalition Against Domestic Violence – (304) 965-3552
- **Wisconsin** Coalition Against Domestic Violence – (608) 255-0539
- **Wyoming** Coalition Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault – (307) 755-5481

- **Virgin Islands**, Women's Resource Center – (809) 776-3966
- **Virgin Islands**, Women's Coalition of St. Croix – (340) 773-9272

## **Other U.S. Organizations Concerned with Domestic Violence:**

- **Battered Women's Justice Project**  
Minnesota Program Development, Inc.  
206 West Fourth Street, Duluth, MN 55806  
(800) 903-0111 Fax (218) 722-1545
- **Center for Mental Health Services' Knowledge Exchange Network (KEN)**  
<http://www.mentalhealth.org/> (English, Spanish).  
An award-winning government Web site that offers a wealth of information about mental health. Visitors can order free publications online, search KEN's referral database, read the latest mental health news, and explore links on a variety of mental health-related topics including child abuse, violence, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, self-help/support groups, treatment, and research.
- **Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence**  
2400 N 45<sup>th</sup> Street, Suite 10, Seattle, WA 98103  
(206) 634-1903 Fax (206) 634-0115
- **Children's Defense Fund**  
25 E Street NW Washington, DC 20001  
(202) 628-8787
- **Health Resource Center on Domestic Violence**  
Family Violence Prevention Fund  
383 Rhode Island Street, Suite 304, San Francisco, CA 94103-5133  
(800) 313-1310 Fax 415-252-8991
- **National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League**  
1156 15th Street, NW #700, Washington, DC 20005  
(202) 973-3000 Fax 202-973-3096
- **National AIDS Network**  
P.O. Box 13827, Research Triangle Park, NC 27709  
National AIDS Hotline: (800) 342-2437 or TTY (800) 243-7889 or Spanish (800) 344-7432
- **National Clearinghouse for the Defense of Battered Women**  
125 South 9th Street, Suite 302 Philadelphia, PA 19107  
(215) 351-0010 Fax (215) 357-0779
- **National Coalition Against Domestic Violence**  
P.O. Box 18749 Denver, CO 80218  
(303) 839-1852 Fax (303) 831-9251  
Materials available from NCADV at <http://www.ncadv.org/products/products/home.htm>:
- **General Information Packet: Every Home a Safe Home**  
a joint project of the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV) and Soroptimist International of the Americas\_ <http://www.soroptimist.org>: There is no charge for the first copy, after that there is a nominal charge for postage and shipping. Contact NCADV <http://www.ncadv.org> for a free copy.
- **Rural Task Force Resource Packet - Reflections on Rural Realities (1991)**  
Compiled by NCADV's Rural Caucus, this 45 page book identifies and discusses the unique issues and barriers faced by rural women and service providers.
- **National Directory of Domestic Violence Programs: A Guide to Community Shelter, Safe Homes and Service Programs**

This NCADV directory lists domestic violence programs throughout the country, each with a comprehensive profile of services. Also includes listings for state coalitions and national resource centers.

- ***Domestic Violence Awareness Month Manual***  
NCADV publishes a resource manual every two years with guidelines, resource materials, ideas, graphics, statistics, sample documents, writings by survivors and outreach materials for special populations.
- ***Rough Love Video and Teaching Guide***  
NCADV lively and provocative dialogue in a talk show format that includes teens, family members, friends and professionals talking about the dynamics and consequences of teen dating violence.
- ***Teen Dating Violence Resource Manual***  
An NCADV technical assistance manual to assist service providers in understanding and addressing the issue of dating violence. The manual includes information on the problem of teen dating violence, how it is defined, teens' perspectives, programs and resources, strategies and options.
- ***Open Minds Open Doors: Working With Women With Disabilities Resource Manual***  
This NCADV manual provides domestic violence agencies with basic guidelines on how to reach out and ensure accessibility of services to women with disabilities who experience abuse.
- **National Coalition for Low-Income Housing**  
1012 14th Street, NW Suite 1200 Washington, DC 20005  
(202) 662-1530
- **National Council on Child Abuse & Family Violence**  
1155 Connecticut Avenue, NW Suite 400 Washington, DC 20036  
(202) 429-6695 or (800) 222-2000
- **National Helpline National Committee for the Prevention of Elder Abuse**  
c/o Institute on Aging Medical Center of Central Massachusetts  
119 Belmont Street Worcester, MA 01605  
(508) 793-6166
- **National Resource Center on Domestic Violence**  
c/o Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence  
6400 Flank Drive, Suite 1300 Harrisburg, PA 17112  
(800) 537-2238 Fax (717) 545-9456
- **Resource Center on Child Custody and Child Protection**  
National Council on Juvenile and Family Court Judges (Library resource only)  
P.O. Box 8970 Reno, NV 98507  
(800) 527-3223 Fax (702) 784-6628
- **Sacred Circle**  
National Resource Center to End Domestic Violence Against Native Women  
722 St. Joseph St., Rapid City, SD 57701  
(605) 341-2050 or (877) 733-7623 Fax (605) 341-2472

## Family Support and Community Service Organizations

- **America's Promise – The Alliance for Youth**  
909 N. Washington Street, Suite 400, Alexandria, VA 22314-1556  
(703) 684-4500 or Fax (703) 535-3900  
Email: [local@americaspromise.org](mailto:local@americaspromise.org) Web: <http://www.americaspromise.org/>  
America's Promise was founded after the Presidents' Summit for America's Future, April 27-29, 1997, in Philadelphia. Presidents Clinton, Bush, Carter and Ford, with First Lady Nancy Reagan

representing her husband, challenged the nation to make youth a national priority. Its mission is to mobilize people from every sector of American life to build the character and competence of our nation's youth.

- **Big Brothers Big Sisters of America**

230 N. 13<sup>th</sup> St., Philadelphia, PA 19107

(215) 567-7000

Email: [national@bbbsa.org](mailto:national@bbbsa.org) Web: <http://www.bbbsa.org/>

This is the nation's largest and oldest youth mentoring organization. Professionals in youth development support individual, responsible volunteer relationships... Each potential volunteer is screened, trained, and supervised to help ensure that the relationship will be safe and rewarding for everyone involved.

- **The National Community Action Foundation**

810 First Street, Suite 530, Washington, DC 20002

(202) 842-2092 or Fax: (202) 842-2095

Email: [info@ncaf.org](mailto:info@ncaf.org) Web: <http://www.ncaf.org/>

The National Community Action Foundation provides a directory by state of Community Action Agencies (CAAs) that generally operate at the county level. Local agencies approach their goals [of alleviating poverty and empowering low-income families] by offering a variety of programs that serve low-income children, families, and seniors. They coordinate emergency assistance, provide weatherization services, sponsor youth programs, operate senior centers and provide transportation in rural areas. CAAs provide linkages to job training opportunities, GED preparation courses, and vocational education programs. They provide a range of services addressing poverty-related problems from income management and credit counseling to entrepreneurial development and small business incubators; from domestic violence crisis assistance to family development programs and parenting classes; from food pantries and emergency shelters to low-income housing development and community revitalization projects.

- **Senior Corps of America**

Corporation for National and Community Service

1201 New York Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20525

(202) 606-5000 or TTY (202) 565-2799

(800) 424-8867 or TTY (800) 833-3722

[webmaster@cns.gov](mailto:webmaster@cns.gov) Web: <http://www.nationalservice.org/contactus.html>

Web: <http://www.seniorcorps.org/>

Senior Corps is a network of programs that tap the experience, skills, and talents of older citizens to meet community challenges with Foster Grandparents, Senior Companions, and RSVP (the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program). Across America, Senior Corps works with thousands of nonprofit organizations to promote senior volunteers as resources, and to help place senior volunteers in ways that help local organizations (many of which are small nonprofits, both secular and faith-based) meet their core missions in the community.

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## **Suggested Crisis Response Guidelines for Assemblies**

*The following is intended to assist an Assembly secretary or other individual who answers the Bahá'í phone in a local community face the responsibility of responding to a crisis call.*

*Spiritual Assemblies may modify these guidelines to better suit local needs as an aspect of developing their own crisis response plans.*

## **What to Do**

- 1) Without making a judgment, assume that the caller is telling the truth.
- 2) Find out if there is any immediate danger. Ask: *“Is anyone in any immediate danger?”*
  - a) If the answer is yes, encourage the person to call 911 or the local police right away. It is best if the caller makes the call. Have the number for the police at hand to give out if 911 is not available in your area.
  - b) If the caller seems reluctant or hesitant, offer to call on her or his behalf. *“Would you like me to call the police for you?”* If the answer is yes, find out where the person is calling from and how to get there, as well as the caller's name and phone number, if you do not know. Immediately relay that information to the local police. **DO NOT** go to the home or location yourself.
- 3) Determine the immediate needs of the caller. Ask such questions as: *“Are you safe? Can you talk now?” “Do you need medical help?” “Do you need immediate help, such as a safe place to go and the means to get there or a place where you can make phone calls safely?” “Do you need someone to help take care of the children?”*
- 4) Find out if the call is for the Assembly. Ask: *“Are you calling to bring this to the attention of the Assembly or did you just want to talk to me personally?” “Do you want to meet with the Assembly?”* If it is a personal contact, follow the guidance in the “Role of Individual” section of the *Supplement*.
- 5) Respond to the call in a calm, assertive, and supportive manner. *“You were right to bring this to the attention of the Assembly, and it took courage to do it. No one has the right to abuse anyone.”* Do not express shock or disbelief, as these responses may discourage the person from contacting the Assembly again or reinforce his or her sense of embarrassment, shame, or feeling of responsibility for the abuse.
- 6) Find out whether the person wants help and what he or she wants help with. Use open-ended questions and give the person the opportunity to speak freely without interruption. Ask such questions as: *“What prompted you to call?” “Would you like to tell me about what happened?” “How do you think the Assembly can help?”*
- 7) If there is screaming or other indications of violence at any time during the call, ask: *“Is everyone all right?” “Do you want me to call the police for you?”* If the answer is yes, respond as in 2b above.
- 8) Provide information or referrals as needed. A local referral list should be part of the Assembly's plan. *“The Assembly has instructed me to maintain a file of information on legal, medical, welfare, and shelter services available, as well as a list of friends who would be glad to accompany you. Please let me know what would be helpful to you.”* (Refer to “Safety First” in the “Protect the Abused” section of the *Supplement*.)
- 9) Assure the caller of the confidentiality of information pertaining to the call. *“The Assembly will keep this information confidential to the extent the law allows.” “Does [name of the alleged abuser] have a close friend or relative on the Assembly?”*
- 10) Assure the caller that the Spiritual Assembly will pray for everyone involved.
- 11) Inform the caller of actions that the Assembly will be taking on his or her behalf. *“The Assembly is meeting Sunday, and we will consult on this matter. I will call you with additional information on Monday.” “The Assembly will arrange a contact liaison for you and will let you know who that will be.”*
- 12) Arrange promptly for a contact person to serve as a liaison between the Assembly and the caller, if the person answering the phone does not perform this function.
- 13) Make a report to the Assembly. However, if the alleged abuser, or a relative or close friend of the alleged abuser, is a member of the Assembly, it is suggested that the person receiving the call contact



the National Spiritual Assembly for advice rather than reporting directly to the Assembly. (Refer to “When Alleged Abuser Is Assembly Member” in the section of the *Supplement* titled “Role and Responsibilities of Local Spiritual Assemblies: General Considerations.”)

## **How to Do It**

### **Do**

- Listen patiently and compassionately. Treat the caller with courtesy, respect, love and kindness. Recognize that each person responds differently to crisis.
- Listen carefully to hear the caller's story. Restate, clarify, and ask open-ended questions.
- Ask questions and note the caller's responses instead of giving answers. If there are answers the Assembly needs to provide, it will do so later.
- Note any commitments or promises made to the caller and follow up on them.

### **Don't**

- Blame, judge, or criticize the caller.
- Make decisions for the caller or tell him or her what to do. These are decisions for individuals to make, and our personal ideas should not be imposed on them. Bear in mind that only the abused party can decide whether to leave or stay in an abusive situation and may not wish to involve civil authorities.
- Hurry the caller's decision process.
- Make promises you or the Assembly can't keep.

### **Caution**

While an Assembly should be prepared to do everything possible to ensure the safety of everyone involved in any domestic violence situation that comes to its attention, it should not attempt to set up a crisis hotline or response unit, as those are not its functions, nor should it place other members of the community in danger by attempting to intervene directly in a crisis situation.

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## **Endnotes**

- 1 A definition of domestic violence, for the purposes of this supplement, appears in the section titled “Definition of Domestic Violence.”
- 2 Civil law includes federal, state, county, municipal, and other local laws.
- 3 The Violence Against Women Act of 2000 (P.L. 106-386) enacted on October 28, 2000, established and strengthened federal laws in response to domestic violence. The language of this legislation is not gender specific and may protect men as well as women.

- 4 The terms victim, 'the abused', and abused person, party, or individual are used interchangeably throughout this supplement to refer to persons who have been or are being abused. These terms are intended to have no other connotations associated with them.
- 5 The terms perpetrator, offender, abuser, and batterer, commonly used by various agencies and organizations in the field, are used interchangeably throughout this supplement to refer to those persons who exhibit patterns of illegal, immoral or unethical behaviors intended to manipulate, control, oppress, or harm others.
- 6 "Intimate violence is primarily a crime against women—in 1998, females were the victims in 72% of intimate murders and the victims of about 85% of non-lethal intimate violence." ("Crime Characteristics, Summary Findings," 2000 National Crime Victimization Survey, U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. Available on-line at [http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/cvict\\_c.htm](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/cvict_c.htm))
- 7 40- 60% of men who abuse women also abuse their children. (American Psychology Association. *Violence and the Family: Report of the American Psychological Association Presidential Task Force on Violence and the Family*. 1996)
- 8 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Will and Testament*, p. 13
- 9 For full quote, refer to "Abuse of Children Is Betrayal of Trust and Denial of Human Rights" in the Bahá'í Laws, Principles, and Exhortations Applying to Domestic Violence section.
- 10 Hart, B. J., "Assessing Whether Batterers Will Kill," *Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence (PCADV)*, 1990
- 11 Up to \_ of domestic assaults reported to law enforcement agencies were inflicted after separation of the couples (U.S. Dept. of Justice, 1983, cited in *Manual for the Second Municipal District of the Circuit Court of Cook County Family Violence Symposium*, Des Plaines, Illinois, March 2000).
- 12 "In 1998 women were nearly 3 out of 4 victims of the 1,830 murders attributable to intimate partners... For both men and women, divorced or separated persons were subjected to the highest rates of intimate partner victimization." (Rennison, C. M. and Welchans, S., "Intimate Partner Violence," 2000 National Crime Victimization Survey, May 2000, NCJ 178247, U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, retrieved August 1, 2002, from <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/ascii/ipv.txt>)
- 13 Campbell, Jacquelyn C., "Child abuse and wife abuse: the connections," *Maryland Medical Journal*, Vol. 43 No. 4, April 1994
- 14 Hart, B. J., *Domestic Violence Overview*, PCADV, 1990
- 15 [The Universal House of Justice – Ed.]
- 16 [Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 297 – Ed.]
- 17 [Quoted by Shoghi Effendi in *The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 26 – Ed.]
- 18 See Resource List of National Support Organizations
- 19 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 168
- 20 ["Flagrant applies to that which cannot escape notice or be condoned, as a flagrant abuse." Webster's *New Collegiate Dictionary*, 1961 – Ed.]
- 21 See note 3.
- 22 Lawyers at a National Conference on Battered Immigrant Women recommended the practice of asking advocates to accompany clients to attorney consultations and to be an active participant in the discussion, if the client so desired.
- 23 Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 30
- 24 In the context of Bahá'í law, immorality refers specifically to extramarital sexual relations.
- 25 [Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*, Arabic no. 3 – Ed.]
- 26 The National Council on Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity

27 National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, "Spiritual Mission for Bahá'í Communities" Five Year Plan, 2001

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## **Index to Guidelines for Spiritual Assemblies on Domestic Violence**

*References include peripheral subjects as well as main themes to facilitate a fuller understanding of what are often very complex matters. Where referenced material on peripheral subjects in the body of the text is sketchy, further exploration from other resources is encouraged. Normally, the full designations of "Local Spiritual Assembly" and "National Spiritual Assembly" are used to denote the dignity and station of the local and national administrative bodies of the Bahá'í Faith. However, because these institutions are referred to often in the index, the abbreviations "LSA" and "NSA" are used to save space.*

*(Note: all page numbers refer to the original document, and will thus differ in this document)*

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**Abuse.** See Abandonment; Abduction; Abusive relationships; Child abuse; Coercion; Corrupting; Deprivation; Domestic violence; Economic abuse; Elders, abuse of; Emotional abuse; Incest; Intimidation; Isolation; Neglect; Pets, injury to; Physical abuse; Property damage; Sexual abuse; Stalking; Terrorizing; Threats; Verbal abuse

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