

There's a tablet printed at the back of *Paris Talks* that seems to say that women cannot be elected to the Universal House of Justice. But it is not a 'Paris talk' and the tablet does not appear in Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Baha or other authenticated compilations. What is its history, and what does the original say?

To: talisman9@yahoogroups.com
Subject: Women on the UHJ
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- > It is appropriate, perhaps, to draw attention to
- > Abdu'l-Baha's statement which indicates that, according to the
- > Baha'i vision, it would be more than only "kings and rulers"
- > alone who would stipulate the use of force and security
- > measures:

Yes, the kings and rulers and governments are to work through an international machinery with respect to some international issues. The point is that, even adding your quotes, and indeed the whole corpus of the writings, there is nothing that would allow the Baha'i Houses of Justice to be in charge of military force or coercion of other sorts. So the argument that women can't be on the UHJ because they are too emotional to take big decisions would be logically irrelevant, even if it wasn't based on nothing more than a negative stereotype of "what women are".

- > If this vision were reality today, it would not have been possible
- > for the U.S. to invade Iraq unilaterally and against the wishes of
- > the United Nations.

If you will excuse me making a "point of order", there has not been any security council or general assembly resolution against the coalition's invasion. Nor has there been any approval. Neither would be possible, because the security council's rules of operation usually mean that it is unable to make a decision on any contentious issue. Nine affirmative votes are required, with no negative votes from the permanent members. That's a recipe for stalemate, and the galling thing is that the US, just as much as Russia (and perhaps the UK

and France), was responsible for making the rules that have kept the security council ineffective throughout most of its history.

- > But is there anything specific within Abdu'l-Baha's writings which
- > would, beyond the shadow of a doubt, decisively show that there is
- > conflict in the composition of the UHJ pertaining to women?

I am not clear what your question is. What conflict ?

- > the UHJ is believed to be infallible in all decisions and
- > formal pronouncements

This is popular Baha'i belief, but is specifically denied by Shoghi Effendi, who says that the sphere of the UHJ is only legislation, and even within that sphere, that the UHJ may make rulings which are not in line with the Baha'i teachings -- for there is no guarantee that it will even know about every aspect of the teachings (it is a lay body, not a collection of experts). Shoghi Effendi writes:

Though the Guardian of the Faith has been made the permanent head of so august a body he can never, even temporarily, assume the right of exclusive legislation. He cannot override the decision of the majority of his fellow-members, but is bound to insist upon a reconsideration by them of any enactment he conscientiously believes to conflict with the meaning and to depart from the spirit of Baha'u'llah's revealed utterances. He interprets what has been specifically revealed, and cannot legislate except in his capacity as member of the Universal House of Justice. He is debarred from laying down independently the constitution that must govern the organized activities of his fellow-members, and from exercising his influence in a manner that would encroach upon the liberty of those whose sacred right is to elect the body of his collaborators.

World Order of Baha'u'llah, page 150 (page numbers vary)

- > If this is the case, if a Baha'i disagrees with the UHJ, isn't it
- > akin to a Roman Catholic disagreeing with the Pope?

No, according to current church doctrine (which was

introduced only 150 years or so ago) the Pope has authority to define matters of doctrine as well as law ("Faith and Morals"). But the UHJ specifically does not have authority to interpret scripture, that is the sphere of the Guardian. You can find this in WOB, a page or so before the quote above, in a well-known passage that begins "An attempt, I feel, should at the present juncture be made to explain the character and functions of the twin pillars ..."

> According to <http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~bahai/docs/vol3/wmnuhj.htm>
> this is from a Tablet of Abdu'l-Baha: '....As regards the
> constitution of the House of Justice, Baha'u'llah addresses the men.
> He says: "O ye men of the House of Justice!" But when its members
> are to be elected, the right which belongs to women, so far as their
> voting and their voice is concerned, is indisputable. ...

This is an interesting tablet, but you should be aware that the version you quote (from Paris Talks) has been editorially doctored. This was often done in the early days, when translations were made by Persian believers whose English was not so good. The original translation might be shared around and often published in Star of the West, but when it was to be included in a book, an editor would "polish" it without reference to the Persian text, or even any knowledge of Persian and Islam (and in some cases with little knowledge of the Baha'i teachings). The results generally raise the level of style to formal English, but also introduce the editor's ideas into the text, and make it harder for us to guess what the underlying Persian might have said. The original translations often have material in brackets to indicate that it is the translator's added clarification. But that looks inelegant when printed on a page, so the brackets are removed, and it is then impossible for the reader to distinguish between what `Abdu'l- Baha said and what the translator has added. For this reason we use the earliest translation wherever possible (unless an editor or translator has later corrected it by referring to the Persian), and the versions published in Paris Talks and Promulgation of Universal Peace and books derived from those should never be relied on. The passage you cite reads, in the original translation:

"As regards the constitution of the House of Justice, Baha-Ullah addressed the men, saying: `O ye men of the House of Justice!' but [nevertheless] the right which belongs to women,

so far as their voting [election, selection] and their voice [vote] is concerned, is indisputable. When women attain to the ultimate degree of progress, then, according to the exigencies of time and place, and of their capacity, they shall obtain extraordinary privileges. Be ye confident on this account. His Holiness Baha-Ullah has greatly strengthened the Cause of women, and their rights and privileges are the special principles of Abdul Baha. Rest ye assured! Ere long the day will come when the men, addressing the women will say:- `Blessed are ye! Blessed are ye! Verily ye are worthy of every gift, and deserve to adorn your heads with the Crown of Everlasting Glory; because in sciences and arts, in virtues and perfections ye have become equal to man, and as regards the tenderness of heart and the abundance of mercy and sympathy ye are superior".

I have inserted some points in []. There are a number of words that could be translated as "but" -- some of them indicate a logical contrast, like the English "nevertheless". If one of these was used, then Abdu'l-Baha was saying: ["despite the words used in the Aqdas, nevertheless women have full rights in the election of the UHJ"]. Perhaps this is the answer to your question above, which I didn't understand ??

I do not think Persian had a word for "voting" at that time, so the word translated as "their voting" might be derived either from "voice" or "selection/election". If it is selection/election (the usual Persian word for these can mean either), then he could be specifically saying that women have the right to be selected and to vote for the houses of justice. Is this the "smoking gun?" Not without the original Persian text, and if the UHJ has that, they have been keeping very quiet about it. It is quite possible that the original has been lost.

The whole text of the original translation can be found in Mirza Sohrab, `Abdu'l-Baha in Egypt, pages 249-50.

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