

Procedure for Local Assemblies in relation to unacceptable behaviour between adults, excluding domestic abuse

The Purpose of this Procedure is to enable Assemblies to take the appropriate action when a report or referral is made in relation to unacceptable behaviour between adults (excluding domestic abuse)

I. Introduction

A. Inappropriate and Unacceptable behaviours

There are many types of inappropriate and unacceptable behaviours between adults, many of which are described in the Bahá'í writings, and include backbiting, bullying, prejudice and discrimination etc. To help consider the varying degrees of behaviour that may be considered unacceptable, as an example the following link provides information about the different kinds of sexual harassment:

<https://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/pdf/whatish.pdf>

This procedure relates to cases when the above abusive behaviours occur outside of the context of a home e.g. in a workplace, educational establishments, religious community or other setting. There is often an unequal power balance that is being exploited and some of these behaviours may be presented as 'normal'. People who highlight and try to stop such activities can be labelled as oversensitive or troublemakers. While these behaviours are always unacceptable they may or may not meet the threshold to be considered a criminal offence.

B. Bahá'í Principles

- Perpetrating such behaviour is contrary to the teachings of the Faith.
- The National Assembly takes the view that not reporting such behaviour and concealing it, is not only detrimental to the well-being and safety of the victim, but also damages the reputation of the Faith. To conceal it undermines the fundamental principles of justice on which the Faith is based and deprives the community of the assurance of protection from such behaviour. 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.
- The local Assembly must be objective and not be influenced by the personalities or the public perception of the individuals and their standing in the community.
- The local Assembly must act swiftly. In general the default position should be that some kind of action be taken. Doing nothing is rarely, if ever, an appropriate response.
- The local Assembly needs to create an environment in which those affected by this type of behaviour know they can trust the local Assembly and be assured of its confidentiality and impartiality.
- The local Assembly should try to follow the procedure formulated by the National Spiritual Assembly when a case of this nature is brought directly to its attention. If this is not possible, it should be reported immediately to the National Secretary.
- In applying the Procedure, the Assembly should use extreme care not to take any action that it or the abused person feels might further endanger anyone. At this point, the local Assembly's approach is to do everything it can to protect and safeguard the

victim and by providing the guidance outlined and providing practical assistance if required.

- The Assembly must deal with all aspects of the matter confidentially, impartially and discreetly, without involving the local community.
- This is not the time to mention or discuss reconciliation, which is part of a different process to be taken later, if appropriate.

II. **Procedure for the investigation of allegations of inappropriate behaviour**

A. **First steps**

1. If the alleged perpetrator is a member of the Local Assembly refer the matter to the National Assembly for guidance. If this is not the case, proceed as follows.
2. All parties must be assured that every effort will be made to preserve their confidentiality. This applies to the complainant, the accused and any person who brings the situation to the attention of the Assembly.
3. The Assembly should reassure the complainant that it is taking their allegation seriously and that it is praying for them.
4. The complainant should be strongly encouraged to report inappropriate behaviour to the police if they believe a crime has been committed. Some of the behaviours in Section 1A are criminal offences and possibly part of a pattern, and complainants should acknowledge that not only is their own wellbeing and protection at risk, but also that of the Bahá'í community and the community at large.
5. If the police become involved the Assembly should not expect to be engaged in the investigation of material facts but should be appropriately supportive of both parties during this period.
6. The Assembly should provide information on agencies to turn to as needed, such as victimsupport.org.uk and rightsofwomen.org.uk. A local referral list should be part of the Assembly's plan and should be offered by the nominated representatives.
7. For the protection of the complainant the Assembly should err on the side of caution and draw up clear boundaries of behaviour for both parties during the period of investigation, whether by the police or the Assembly's representatives. These boundaries should be immediately applicable.

Examples of boundaries:

- Ensure the complainant and the accused do not attend activities together.
- The Bahá'í responsibilities of the accused may have to be put on hold for the duration of the investigation.
- Advise against any communication between the parties.
- In principle as few people as possible should be involved in the process. A judgement on this will be on a case by case basis.
- The Assembly is to ensure that all parties have a trusted support worker in place before any investigatory process begins. This could be someone to talk to or to accompany them to any community activities.

The Assembly is to appoint four investigators to examine the complaint: two to be allocated to the complainant and two to the accused. One of each pair should be of the same gender as the complainant and the accused.

B. Ongoing support

The Assembly will arrange any support or accompaniment that is requested.
The Assembly will ensure that any boundaries it has set are adhered to.
The Assembly will keep a careful record of all developments.

C. The Meetings

- The complainant and the accused should meet separately with the Assembly representatives during the investigation process. At no point should the complainant and accused be left alone together during this process nor at any later stage of support or reconciliation.
- The purpose of these meetings is to take a personal statement from each person about the alleged incident.
- No electronic recording devices are to be used in the meeting. Everyone is free to make written notes. Representatives of the Institutions should always take contemporaneous notes at all meetings whether for initial investigation or for later support or possible reconciliation.
- In order to preserve confidentiality, the only people at these meetings should be the representatives of the Assembly and either the complainant or the accused. The only exception would be if the accused wished to bring a legal representative or their designated support worker.

D. Guidance for the meetings

- Reassure them that every effort will be made to preserve their confidentiality.
- The meetings are solely about gathering information in order to come to the truth. Any prayers that might be chosen to initiate the meeting should celebrate truth and justice.
- Both parties are to be treated with respect. Neither party should be prejudged according to their gender or status in the community.
- Explain what boundaries have been put in place in order to protect both parties while the investigation process takes place.
- Remind the complainant that they should go to the police if they believe a crime has been committed. If they do this, they should take the advice of the police regarding further contact with the accused.
- Both the complainant and the alleged abuser should give their explanation of the event in question.
- Be alert to the human tendency to minimize bad behaviour and shift blame. When meeting with the accused it will be important to take note of any minimization of their behaviour or shifting of blame.
- The Writings of the Faith should not be used by either party to justify bad behaviour or gain personal advantage.

E. The report of the investigators

Amongst the possible conclusions of the investigation are that:

- the complainant had made a malicious accusation,
- there had been a genuine misunderstanding,
- the accused denies guilt,
- the accused admits guilt, and
- it is not possible to determine the truth.

In their report to the Assembly the investigators should take care to make a clear record of their conclusions and recommendations and note whether any further action is required.

The report is to be kept in a confidential file.

The decision of the Assembly will be communicated to both parties by its representative. If any sanctions are imposed these should be communicated to all interested parties such as Assemblies to whose area the person sanctioned has moved or to the National Spiritual Assembly of any country which they are known to be visiting. Communication with other National Spiritual Assemblies would take place through the UK National Spiritual Assembly. Even if sanctions have not been imposed, if the information suggests that there may be a sufficient risk the report should clarify that a similar sharing process needs to be activated.

III. **Exploring the Possibility of Reconciliation where Appropriate**

‘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.’

(Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh – pages 66-67)

- Unity is impossible if there is no justice. Therefore, any act of injustice needs to be addressed for unity to be established.
- If, after the investigation, both parties want a face-to-face meeting this should be facilitated by the Assembly who should appoint a mediator.
- Ideally in the early stages the mediator and both parties to the dispute should be the only people at this meeting. However, there may be occasions when a person would clearly benefit from support to ensure their constructive participation in the process. In that case, after careful consideration, the presence of a support person might be agreed.

IV. **Quotations from Bahá'í Texts**

1. They that follow their lusts and corrupt inclinations, have erred and dissipated their efforts. They, indeed, are of the lost.
(Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings, p. 297)
2. Thine eye is My trust, suffer not the dust of vain desires to becloud its luster. Thine ear is a sign of My bounty, let not the tumult of unseemly motives turn it away from My Word that encompasseth all creation. Thine heart is My treasury, allow not the treacherous hand of self to rob thee of the pearls which I have treasured therein. Thine hand is a symbol of My loving-kindness, hinder it not from holding fast unto My guarded and hidden Tablets.
(Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings, p. 322)
3. Follow not the promptings of the self, for it summoneth insistently to wickedness and lust; follow, rather, Him Who is the Possessor of all created things, Who biddeth you to show forth piety, and manifest the fear of God.
(Bahá'u'lláh, Kitab-i-Aqdas, para. 64)
4. Acts of abuse might properly be regarded as a negation of the persistent emphases on concord, understanding and unity which are at the heart of the Bahá'í Teachings, and

the sacred writings are replete with advice as to how these positive objectives may be attained. O ye beloved of the Lord! In this sacred Dispensation, conflict and contention are in no wise permitted. Every aggressor deprives himself of God's grace.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá - Will and Testament)

5. O ye lovers of God! In this, the cycle of Almighty God, violence and force, constraint and oppression, are one and all condemned.
(‘Abdu’l-Bahá - Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, p. 149)
6. In His *Tablet of the World Bahá’u’lláh* states, ‘... The distinguishing feature that marketh the pre-eminent character of this Supreme Revelation consisteth in that We have, on the one hand, blotted out from the pages of God’s holy Book whatsoever hath been the cause of strife, of malice and mischief amongst the children of men and have, on the other, laid down the essential prerequisites of concord, of understanding, of complete and enduring unity. Well is it with them that keep My statutes.’
7. Elsewhere in the same Tablet the ‘people of God’ are forbidden ‘to engage in contention and conflict’:
8. 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 behaviour by the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh.
(Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, 24 January 1993)
9. Beware lest ye transgress the bounds of courtesy and commit that which your minds and your hearts abhor. This is that whereunto ye were bidden by the Pen of God, the Almighty, the Most Powerful. All hail then to this, the Festival of the Lord, that hath appeared above a horizon of wondrous grace!
(Bahá’u’lláh Days of Remembrance - Ridván Selection 7)
10. It is inadmissible that man, who hath been endowed with reason, should consume that which stealeth it away. Nay, rather it behooveth him to comport himself in a manner worthy of the human station, and not in accordance with the misdeeds of every heedless and wavering soul.
11. Adorn your heads with the garlands of trustworthiness and fidelity, your hearts with the attire of the fear of God, your tongues with absolute truthfulness, your bodies with the vesture of courtesy. These are in truth seemly adornings unto the temple of man, if ye be of them that reflect.
(Bahá’u’lláh - The Kitáb-i-Aqdas)

12. Justice is not limited, it is a universal quality. Its operation must be carried out in all classes, from the highest to the lowest. Justice must be sacred, and the rights of all the people must be considered. Desire for others only that which you desire for yourselves. Then shall we rejoice in the Sun of Justice, which shines from the Horizon of God.
 - i. ('Abdu'l-Bahá - Paris Talks - The Ninth Principle)

13. O Son of Spirit! Noble have I created thee, yet thou hast abased thyself. Rise then unto that for which thou wast created.
 - i. (Bahá'u'lláh - The Hidden Words - Arabic, 22)

14. We have forsaken the path of God; we have given up attention to the divine Kingdom; we have not severed the heart from worldly attractions; we have become defiled with qualities which are not praiseworthy in the sight of God; we are so completely steeped in material issues and tendencies that we are not partakers of the virtues of humanity.
 - i. ('Abdu'l-Bahá - The Promulgation of Universal Peace - page 186)

15. O Lord! Dispel the darkness of these corrupt desires, and illumine the hearts with the lamp of Thy love.
 - i. ('Abdu'l-Bahá - Tablets of the Divine Plan – page 58)