

WOMEN: FIGHTING FOR LIFE ITSELF

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I am a Pakistani girl who has spent most of her life in Britain. By frequent visits and letters, I have kept in close contact with my family, but it has only been recently that I have really taken a good look at the country of Pakistan and its people. I have been aware of the situation of women here, but it was in this particular visit that my eyes were fully opened to the plight of the women of Pakistan. Feminism to me has always been the equal and opposite of sexism. I have always felt that it is individuals, not men, that cause problems in our society— after all, I have never met a “feminist” that supports the Prime Minister of Britain. But I have found this belief hard to maintain since I came to Pakistan, and it has taken all my self-control and rationale to prevent myself from becoming a rabid, man-hating feminist. In Britain, there are still many women whose destiny is to stay at home and be a “wife and mother”. But times are changing. There are now a number of women who find it possible to pursue a career, as well as bring up a family. This is especially so since universities and workplaces are beginning to provide day- care centres and creches. Along with this, men’s attitudes are gradually changing too; not only are husbands changing nappies, but the number of men prepared to take time off from their jobs to look after a baby, although small, is increasing. So, although there is still a long way to go before true equality is achieved, women’s status is improving. The idea that the feminist movement is still greatly needed in Britain seems ridiculous when you look at women in Pakistan. Women are seen as a burden by their families, especially the father who cannot see past the fact that he will have to pay a dowry. From day one, girls are discriminated against; they are given less food and attention, even love than their brothers. Very few girls will be given any useful education, being told that all they need to know is how to cook, clean and sew. Worst of all, physical violence is rife; women are beaten by their fathers and, later on, their husbands, for anything these men feel are acts of disobedience by the women. Also, despite the taboos placed on even the mention of the subject, sexual abuse within families should not be ignored. Women have been pushed down to second class citizens; they are not even equal in theory. There is no Sex Discrimination Act, instead we have the Law of Evidence and the Hudood Ordinance. Although it has been long known that traditions and tribal laws have been used to suppress women, it was only recently that this passed onto a national level. With the law against them, women have nowhere to turn. It is not a progressive view to say that you should take what you’ve got because it’s better than another place or time. Everyone should always fight for what they believe in, no matter how small it may seem. But everything should be kept in perspective; In Britain, women are fighting for a better life; in Pakistan women are fighting for life itself.

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