Promoting Gender Equality: Icons of Feminism in South Asia

Historians will presumably recall that the Twenty First Century accorded particular importance to the issue of gender equality, even as many individual men and women did not question the role society assigned to them. Changing a centuries old patriarchal system from which many benefit – notwithstanding their professions of good faith, remains a sensitive matter as many prefer minor alterations to thoroughgoing structural reform. Examples of resistance abound around the world: from all social classes and all religions.

Pakistan joined the global campaign for gender equality in odd circumstances, following the attacks of September 11th, 2001 and the American-led operation Enduring Freedom that began the following month in Afghanistan. Numerous NGOs, sometimes of very recent foundation, stood up bravely to initiate the campaign. This provoked the anger of conservative political and religious groups, both in remote regions, as well as cities such as Peshawar whose sociological make-up had already been profoundly transformed by events in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Female and male social workers paid with their lives as a result of the effort to challenge the structure of society. For parts of civil society they served to inspire other Pakistani women and men to take up the struggle.

With the Islamic Republic of Pakistan celebrating seventy years of existence, it is appropriate to recall a recent period of its history and in South Asia. Researchers are invited to evaluate the efforts the many NGOs that have worked to promote the condition of women. A further dimension which is that SDPI, currently celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary, seeks to look at during this SDC is the actions of the role models who have left their mark on the struggle to promote gender equality in the region.

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