

Graduation 2011

Acceptance Speech by Honorary Graduate Professor the Baroness Afshar

Chancellor, it is indeed a great honour to be given an honorary doctorate by one of the best universities in the UK. One of the new universities that in the 1960's broke the monopoly of the old establishment and laid the path towards a new dynamic approach both to academe and recruitment, the result of these wonderfully varied students we see here, some of who are here joining the education sector for the first time, you are most welcome and most fortunate to have come to this university where people from all over the world come to study. I'm also humbled by being nominated by one of my great heroes, Professor Elson. Her invaluable work in the field of feminist economics on the valorisation of women, time and work was path breaking and has remained a point of reference for a vast body of literature including much of my work. It's hardly surprising that the department of Sociology continues to be top in the country. With academics like that, you couldn't be anywhere else.

I also think that the current cohort is particularly lucky to have managed to have come through almost unscathed, compared to future graduates who'll have to embark on life with an even greater burden of debt. As someone who came to the UK as a foreign student and paid exactly the same fees as the British students, that's going back some, I fear for the future in terms of the current restrictions on students visa's that would deprive the flourishing universities from continuing as they had begun by bringing young minds from across the world to work together and learn from one another. For those of us who are born elsewhere or have been labelled as different by our communities or host communities, the University experience is one that opens new opportunities and horizons. It counter prejudices, gives us flexibility and the possibility of celebrating rather than fearing differences. Those of us who were students in the 1960's aimed at breaking down all the barriers and living life to the full. But even though the economic circumstances demand of you, the new graduands, to be far more responsible, far earlier. I know that going through the University has given you, as it did us, some thinking time to find out who you really are, and what goals you would like to prioritise. It's also allowed you to gain the courage to formulate and express considered opinions that may well counter the received wisdom.

Chancellor, I suggest that perhaps the last bastion of true British values are its universities and I very much hope that you will go on as you have begun. Of course, the road ahead is not easy. When I returned to the UK, before the Islamic revolution in Iran, I applied to over 200 jobs before getting my first interview. It was very hard to find myself no longer an elite woman but suddenly labelled as ethnic minority. And to see that my name, my colour, and my gender defined me both as an outsider and also as inferior. But then, as now, I was up for the fight with great confidence instilled with me, by not only my mother who was a second generation feminist and a third generation feminist, but also by the good education that I received in this country. I learned to turn adversity on its head and to advantage. And this is why, as Professor Elson mentioned, when Islamophobia came, I had to stand up once more as the other, as a Muslim feminist, and people started asking me whether that was an oxymoron.

Well ladies and gentlemen, when I decided when I got married some 30 years ago, not to change my name, the registrar thought I was getting it wrong and when I actually insisted, that made headlines in the newspapers locally, 'reluctant bride refuses to change name.' But as a Muslim for 14 centuries, I was entitled to have my identity, my own personal wealth and in many ways as I explained to my husband in terms of Islam, because of wages for housework, and the right of

suckling baby, what's mine is mine and what's his is mine too. And that actually worked extremely well so it's not surprising that I consider myself as a feminist.

It seems to me that the problem that we have, both as Muslims and as feminists, is not that we don't have rights, is that we have to constantly fight for them; otherwise the jolly men take it away. I must say that success is not always predictable; I was absolutely astounded when I was invited to apply to the House of Lords. I had always been an outsider, a troublemaker; it didn't quite seem the right place for me to go. But, I'm up for any challenge, and so I decided to go for the interview. When I went to the interview, the chair leant over and said to me, "didn't I invite you to come to a delegation with me to France and you refused?" And I had to say, "well I'm very sorry, I was running a focus group for Muslim women and I thought that there need was greater than yours". And I just assumed after that, that really the interview was lost. So, I answered every question as exactly the way I thought, not something that I advise to graduates to do. Err but miraculously I actually got in. It was doable for me and I'm sure that it is doable for you. It may take time, it will certainly be far from easy, but I think you have integrity, you know how to be true to yourself, be steadfast, and never, never give up. The future of my grandchildren depends on you.

Thank you.