

## **I refuse to give up**

(Original)

*Lamees Anza Khan*

*(Age 18, Pakistan)*

That night was a soul-shattering one when Asma came to my house. She was all pale and shivering. Her eyes were overflowing with tears, and her body was sweating with fear as if she was trembling inside. I tried to ask her what happened but failed every time; my throat tightened, and terror choked me. Finally, realizing this, I tried to understand her appearance; ripped-off sleeves, bleeding nose, and clothes covered with blood horrified me even more. "Look what they have done to me," she uttered a few words and collapsed onto the floor. She was brutally tortured by a man 20 years older than her, whom she was forced to marry.

Asma, one of my closest childhood friends, became a victim of a deadly tradition in our society: marrying off daughters to men of another family, regardless of their age difference, to end rivalries between families. Asma's mental health declined so furiously after this dreadful event that she took her own life. I never imagined a lively and joyous person would die in such pain.

My homeland, Gilgit Baltistan, despite being renowned for its spectacular natural beauty, when it comes to gender equality and social norms, has the deadliest and ugliest realities, where women's rights are violated and disrespected. One cannot live in a dominant male society and suppress the urge to stand up for the rights of women that induces in you. Residing 18 years in a community far away from the developed world, deeply rooted in its traditional value systems of ultra-conservatism, and under misogynists' sway, taught me to speak up for my privilege. The abject status of women has ignited a fire inside me that can only be extinguished when the daughters of this land will get their rights. A storm that will only settle down when every girl out there feels safe and tyranny in the name of religion will end.

This time is not for being silent and staying back; such traditions need to be ended. And it is only possible when people of this area take a stand. Countless girls out there suffer such cruelty, bury their dreams deep in their hearts, and keep quiet in fear of being killed. Even though these stories frequently look antiquated in today's advanced world, this is the truth that must be portrayed. Availing my opportunities, I want to be among those who took the first step towards change, who did not stay back but recognized their worth. The goals I want to achieve and the passion I am following strengthen me not to give up. The hopelessness around me hurts me but never weakens my ambition. On the contrary, it gives me courage and determination as standing up for myself inspires all those girls in my community whose eyes sparkle when they see books but cannot express their urges. Such a culture is no less than the Arab tradition of burying girls alive- thousands of years ago.

Asma encountered the brutality of men when she was at the age of only receiving love and affection from the world. She endured the sorrow that permeates the soul. Even worse, her parents compelled her to keep her mouth shut so no one would know what she had gone through. My society, rooted deep in tradition, continues to paint the canvas of my life with the brush of its wishes, expectations, and demands. However, I have stood gritty in my resolution to defend my right to liberty, expression, and justice. With the aim that no more Asmas will have to face such cruel traditions of society, no other girl will ever be killed for honor, and no more criminals will roam freely outside, I refuse to forfeit my right. I refuse to give up.