

PARVEEN AKHTAR AND PUMMI MATTU DCL

Mr Vice-Chancellor,

Parveen Akhtar and Parmjit Kaur Mattu are two remarkable women. They have tirelessly and fearlessly campaigned for equality within our society, standing up for those who have no voice, and tackling issues that many people are ashamed even to acknowledge. They have done this quietly, and effectively. We are indebted to them for the work they have done, both here in the North East of England, and across the United Kingdom.

Both began their professional lives studying Social Sciences, establishing the theoretical and scientific bedrock which underpins their work. But Parveen, and (as all of her friends and colleagues call her) Pummi, are anything but academic in their approach. Both have worked directly with the victims of inequality. They are not afraid to engage the oppressor – be that a directly threatening individual, an organisation, or even, at times, representatives of the State. And in doing so, they have gained widespread respect at all levels – from women and children who are the victims of domestic violence, to the policymakers in Local and National Government, where their input has been invaluable in shaping social policy.

Examples of their groundbreaking work include a critical contribution to national standards on issues relating to

domestic violence, and a major influence in Home Office guidelines on forced marriages. They have never been afraid to highlight and address the most sensitive issues including religious-based mutilation, prostitution, and people trafficking.

But the practicalities have been equally important to them, working tirelessly at grassroots level. They are founder members of “Panah”, the first black women’s refuge in North East England. They were also instrumental in the success of “DIVA”, a voluntary agency working towards non-violence through the integration of multi-agency work. They personally delivered specialist training to a whole host voluntary and statutory bodies including the Northumbria Police, the Health Service, the NSPCC, and local authority agencies. And in doing so, they have made the unconventional conventional, ensuring a mainstream co-ordinated response from all parties that deliver support to the victims of domestic violence. Not stopping there, they have frequently provided practical and emotional support to individual women and children, often exposing themselves to considerable personal risk.

Increasing public awareness has been a key aspect of their work, often taking them to extremes. They are clearly not afraid of entering the eye of the storm, wherever it takes them. And despite the gravity of the situations in which they find themselves, they remain calm, compassionate and collected. One senior colleague described them both as “a pair of swans,

serene on the surface, but paddling frantically underwater” – inspiring all who come into contact with them.

In talking to their friends and colleagues I was struck by the extraordinary warmth generated by Parveen and Pummi wherever they go. Those closest to them hold them in the highest regard, and comment that both have an inner strength based on a very strong family background. Their own families are, as you might imagine, extremely important to them. Those of us fortunate to have a strong family base often prefer to live our lives within this “comfort zone”, leaving the difficult and dangerous work to others. So how have these two unassuming ladies broken out of the mould, and managed to do the unthinkable?

All comment on the symbiotic relationship they have, and in coming together they have formed a critical mass, underpinned by core values of inclusivity, equality, and bravery. Together, their joint energy forms a chain-reaction on nuclear proportions, influencing all around to defy traditional social boundaries. It is therefore entirely fitting that Parveen and Pummi have both defied usual convention again today, following the pattern of their interlinked professional and personal lives, in being jointly awarded honorary degrees this afternoon.

Considering the taboo issues they have dealt with, and the necessarily discreet nature of much of their work, it would have been unthinkable for these two women to have received an honorary degree from a British University some 100, 50, or perhaps even 25 years ago. And yet, it is precisely because of their work, and of those like them, that we have moved society forwards, on a pathway along which we cannot return. They embody tolerance and abhor injustice – and through this, their unconventional work has made them an integral part of our new society. They have become a beacon of what is great in the reformed British establishment, so it is entirely fitting that our establishment honours them today.

Mr Vice-Chancellor, in recognition for their groundbreaking work as the victims' champion, moving us towards a society of which we can be proud, I now ask that you bestow upon Parveen Akhtar and Parmjit Kaur Mattu degrees of Doctor of Civil Law, *honoris causa*.

Citation by Professor Patrick Chinnery