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Bringing the Focus Back: *Aurat March*¹ and the Regeneration of Feminism in Pakistan

By Syeda Mujeeba Batool² and Aisha Anees Malik³

Abstract

This paper traces the evolution and regeneration of the feminist movement in Pakistan. It examines the contemporary feminist movement in the country against the backdrop of strong opposition faced by protest style congregations named 'Aurat March' on international women's day. Weaving the narrative through conversations of leading feminists and prominent individuals belonging to the religious right, it postulates how the backlash to raising issues of sexuality and body politics has regenerated the feminist movement in Pakistan.

Keywords: Feminist movement in Pakistan, Body politics, Feminist activism

Introduction

This paper summarizes how the feminist movement in Pakistan has evolved and where it stands today. The movement in Pakistan advanced from reform-based feminism in the early years of Pakistan to secularist/street politics during the 1980s, to diffusion/co-optation/NGO-isation during the 1990s and 2000s, and finally to its current phase of taking up issues of sexuality and body politics epitomised by the slogan, "my body, my choice". The unprecedented flow of information, emergence of widespread social media, and global events like the "#MeToo" movement in the 2010s have contributed towards the recalibration of contemporary Pakistani feminism. This strand of feminism challenges all forms of patriarchy by bringing women's sexuality and body politics to the centre stage. One of the most exemplary ways it does so is by using iconic slogans, such "personal is political" and "*mera jism, meri marzi*", meaning "my body, my choice".

Pakistan's contemporary feminist movement has regained focus that was arguably lost during 1990s and early 2000s. Although it took up a few important issues during that time, the movement remained silent about many women, and when it did raise a voice, support for those stances was not strong enough. As such, the movement's lackadaisical efforts to tackle body autonomy, sexuality, LGBT issues, private patriarchy and division of labour, etc., did not amount to much in the 1990s.

¹ *Aurat* is the Urdu word for a woman. *Aurat March* stands for women's march.

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Because of hotly contested debates surrounding the *Aurat* March, no study of the movement will be complete without understanding the views of its proponents and opponents. The *Aurat* March has been deemed the third generation of feminism or the new wave by its proponents; partly because of this, it has generated a stronger backlash than any of its predecessors. This paper attempts to investigate the reasons as to why *Aurat* March has attracted unprecedented criticism.

Qualitative research was carried out to explore the subjectivities, realities, and opinions of women who have been part of Pakistan's feminist movement, as well as men and women belonging to the religious right. A purposive and judgement sample was selected, keeping in mind the research questions and consideration of the research resources available. The method of inquiry relied on in-depth interviews of Feminist Research Methodology (FRM) to gain insight into the opinions of preselected research participants. Being part of Women Action Forum (WAF) and the feminist movement for over two decades ourselves, we were able to connect to both veteran feminists and young and contemporary feminists. Thus, we also used a snowballing technique to identify additional research participants. To contact opponents of feminism or participants who used a religious framework to position women in the society, we asked friends and acquaintances for assistance. Overall, 30 in-depth interviews were conducted with participants from both camps. Most of the interviews were conducted face to face. Some were also conducted via telephone. Only two interviews were conducted through email; in those, we shared a list of questions, including probes, to facilitate detailed responses.

General Perceptions about the Feminist Movement in Pakistan

The feminist movement remains controversial in Pakistan. It has often been maligned publicly and privately as a foreign import and a hobby of elitist women who wish to imitate western culture while rejecting their own traditions and religion. Opponents claim that the movement is a western conspiracy, determined to corrupt and destroy the social, cultural, and religious values of an Islamic society. They argue that feminism does not represent all women, and its benefits are limited to urban, educated, and elite women. Pakistan's feminist movement still receives severe opposition from right-wing groups and from most Pakistani men. Society in general and men in particular think that feminism is only about hating men. Thus, feminists are often ridiculed and demonized as "feminazis", a pejorative used to describe what the men imagine to be a movement run by elitist angry women to establish their supremacy over men in order to dominate them. The perceptions surrounding feminist attitudes and actions are quite extreme in Pakistan; a demand for equality is seen as being tantamount to a belief in supremacy over men. The opponents also claim that feminism is not an indigenous phenomenon, and therefore, does not have any ethical and political base. These general perceptions have caused damage to the feminist movement's credibility.

It is worth mentioning that even some renowned feminists have been critical and sceptical of the local feminist movement until recently. Figures such as Dr. Rubina Saigol, Saba Gul Khattak, and Dr. Farzana Bari have criticised the feminist movement with respect to achievements, challenges, and silences in its articulations. To them, the movement—which was robust and vibrant during the 1980s—has reached a saturation point. It diffused and stalled in the 1990s and early 2000s with the advent of NGOs, vis-à-vis funded activism. They also believe that the movement has lost steam with the policies of respective governments routinely co-opting it. However, the same evidence can be used to argue that the feminist movement interacting and lobbying with different governments has allowed it to evolve, transform, and progress in different

directions. Nonetheless, the movement's influence on policy and practice with regards to putting women's rights on the national agenda by the feminists' activism and lobbying cannot be denied. Even a look at the legislative reforms during the last decade alone will reveal several pro-women laws passed by the Parliament, such as the Women Protection Act, the honour killings bill, legislation against acid attacks and other harmful practices (in Jan 2021, the Lahore High Court (LHC) abolished virginity tests, including the two-finger test (TFT) for examination of sexual assault survivors "illegal and against the Constitution), and the ability to secure an increased number of seats in the parliament and local governments. However, some factions of the feminist movement are of the view that the movement was diffused and depoliticised due to the surge in funded activism (NGO-ization), and co-optation from governments over time has resulted in immense fragmentation.

Rubina Saigol says that "welfare and service delivery organizations are generally believed to be neither rights-based nor feminist in orientation. Movements, such as Sindhyani Tehreek⁴, which espouse feminist principles, exist in small pockets." She also believes that the founding members of the movement have failed to mentor or inspire young women from the second and third generations. She reiterates that movements are fuelled by passion, commitment, and volunteerism and cannot be salaried 9-5 projects. These projects seldom address structural injustices and patriarchy, because they risk jeopardizing their own positions within the system, and funding from NGOs is tied to agendas which dilute and depoliticise the movement. A funded movement therefore cannot be an autonomous movement, either financially or in terms of agendas and ideology (Saigol, *Feminism and the Women's Movement in Pakistan*, 2016, pp. 43-45).

Saba Gul Khattak and Dr. Farzana Bari also pointed out that due to subtle differences in the manner in which these bodies conceptualize the women's movement, the efforts and work done by NGOs cannot be termed feminist or a decisive part of the women's movement. They also reiterated that whenever social structures are threatened, particularly the institution of patriarchy, the governments are not amenable to change. Additionally, global changes have depoliticised and weakened the movement. In their article, they say,

"it stayed aloof from issues that revolved around cultural constructs or addressing issues considered to belong to private spheres, such as family, marital rape or domestic violence.... the movement cannot claim substantial success, especially when it comes to family and community" (Bari, 2001, p. 76).

Feminist Movement in Pakistan: Conversations with Leading Feminists

Feminists and women's rights activists interviewed for this research unanimously called feminism a full-fledged socio-political movement and recalled numerous achievements of feminist movement in Pakistan. All social, political, and economic emancipation women have achieved since the inception of Pakistan is mostly attributed to the untiring efforts of feminists who kept struggling to bring attention to women's problems, despite facing numerous challenges and opposition. The movement has grown and evolved over time in the face of criticism from outside and from within, and has continued to impact state policy. Saigol, in her report for FES, writes,

⁴ Sindhyani Tehreek was launched in 1980 by rural women of Sindh province of Pakistan to fight the discriminatory laws against women promulgated by General Zia ul Haq, a dictator who led the coup d'état, abrogated 1973 constitution, and overthrew elected government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in 1977.

“The relationship between the women’s movement and the Pakistani state has undergone significant shifts, from mutual accommodation and a complementary ethos to confrontation and conflict, followed by collaboration, co-optation and, finally, collusion, depending upon transformations in the nature of the state at particular moments in history” (Saigol, *Feminism and the Women’s Movement in Pakistan*, 2016).

Commonly held views regarding feminism dismiss it as an “imported ideology” which contradicts Pakistani traditions, values, and culture. Pakistani Feminists contest with these allegations questioning the nature of what is considered “indigenous” and deconstruct notions of what is considered fundamentally “Pakistani”; emphasizing that Islam came from Saudi Arabia and Democracy from the West. They work to redefine what feminism means in context: when women start working for their rights, they eventually become conscious of feminism regardless of whether they belong to the East or West. Popular claims that feminism is foreign, westernized, elitist, and exclusive is refuted by feminists with reference to active politics, where the salient trend is of the right-wing siding with the elite. Taking the personal is political as a reference point; they emphasize women gaining political consciousness due to their personal experiences, with experiences shaped by a larger political context. Feminism in Pakistan can then be branded as a movement shaped by women reacting to their circumstances: a woman facing violence on the daily, attempting to change the customs, values, and norms that legitimize violence against women, is a feminist.

Although, Pakistani feminists duly acknowledge the development of feminist theories developed in the western academy, they brought their own experiences to the feminist movement, taking a more intersectional approach championed by scholars of the global south. Taking a more nuanced approach to the struggle, they acknowledge that the lived realities that form a basis for women’s’ political consciousness vary greatly depending on age, class, ethnicity, race, and even occupation and marital status. Pakistani feminists consider how many foreign ideas and movements have been welcomed and often “localised” with greater ease: ideas such as liberal democracy and Islamic socialism have been made palatable in different time periods, and they question why localized feminism cannot be provided the same leverage.

Farida Shaheed expresses in her article,

“those who deliberately promoted the myth that women who engage in the struggle for women’s rights are, ipso facto, westernized and alien to their own societies ought to be robustly contested.... the absence of vernacular terms facilitates the suggestion – that ‘feminism’ is a North American/ European agenda, if not an outright conspiracy, and its local ‘westernized’ proponents, at best, out of touch with the grounded reality of ‘local women’ and representatives of their needs at worst agents of imperial agendas” (Shaheed, 2005).

Confronting the opponents’ allegation that the feminist movement in Pakistan does not have any strong political base, the proponents of feminism strongly emphasize that it has established itself as a political movement through various deliberations and articulations. As Afiya S. Zia writes in her book *Faith and Feminism*, “The absence of a political base for any movement would mean that such an enterprise becomes limited to an academic exercise” (Zia A. S., p. 22). She reiterates if there was no political substance to the feminist movement in Pakistan, it would have died out

long ago: it is a movement in continuous transformation. Another reason provided for its salience is that it is not comprised of a homogenous group of women; there are several initiatives taken up by rural, peasant women, urban working-class women, polio workers, and Lady Health Workers. The feminist movement in Pakistan cannot be understood without considering the diverse backgrounds of its members.

Aurat March is seen by feminists as a vehicle for centring women's concerns in political, parliamentary, social, and journalistic discussion. It has helped bring the question of women's oppression out of drawing rooms and into the public sphere; the debates generated at all levels are considered as one of the biggest gains. Moreover, it has been inclusive in every way as women from all walks of life have participated: urban, rural, working class, housewives, educated, young and old, artists, and writers and thinkers from all walks of life were part of the March. It represented all ideologies of feminism: liberals demanding personal liberties, welfare and legal provisions; radical feminists who want to break the shackles of patriarchy, and socialist feminists seeking freedom from capitalism and patriarchy. The organizers ask why their demands for equal rights, an end to gender-based violence, discrimination, and subjugation are seen as excessive, addressing matters regarding body politics, forced conversions and marriages, and access to public spaces.

Feminism in Pakistan has evolved to the next stage and is taking up issues concerned with the public and private, the state, society, home and family, centring sexuality and body politics in the debate. During the 1980s and even now the state has remained obsessed about women's bodies, particularly with covering and concealing them. "*Chadar aur chardewari*" (the veil and the four walls of the home) was glorified during General Zia's regime which aimed at confining women to their homes. The new generation's feminist politics are premised on the understanding that the personal is political; women's lived experiences and their relationship, and access to physical space are now gaining importance.

Bring the Focus Back: *Aurat* March and the Regeneration of Feminism in Pakistan **Introduction and Background to *Aurat* March**

Since independence, the mainstream feminist approach has shifted from reform-based feminism to secularist street politics fighting for women's rights in the mid-1980s while resisting General Zia's Islamization policies. During the 1990s and after the War on Terror era feminism grew, and by the 2010s the current manifestation of contemporary Pakistani feminism consolidated itself. One of its most recognizable slogans from this current period is "*mera jism, meri marzi*", translating to "my body, my choice", a slogan which has sparked controversies and debates online, in the media, in discussion circles, and in the academy.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, the robust socio-political feminist movement diffused due to NGOization and co-optation of the movement by state bodies. However, since 2017, international women's day has taken on new relevance; the day marks a full-fledged women's movement (*Aurat* March) taking to the streets, raising questions about structural (public) and private patriarchy, women's subjugation, and oppression. The *Aurat* March has been choosing a different theme every year on 8th March (International Women's Day) since 2017. The event is organized to bring together Pakistani women in an intersectional event to raise their voices collectively against oppression and subjugation within the private and public spheres. The March was seen as a harbinger, the first ever organic feminist movement in the country in which gatherers refused to remain silent on violence against women.

The organizers of the *Aurat* March—feminists, human rights activists, and victims of online trolling—determined that a vibrant feminist movement is essential for changing the status quo, which is characterised by patriarchy and its performativity, social injustice, and inequality. Every annual *Aurat* March in Pakistan is followed by severe backlash from the religious right. The conservative segments of society reiterate that it is a ‘western agenda’ that endangers men, allowing them to raise ‘what about men’ questions.

The *Aurat* March is significant in many ways. First, it is an organic and inclusive event organized every year by diverse groups of women, men, and trans-people from all walks of life, mainly in four major cities, i.e., Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad, and Faisalabad. Second, the March receives unprecedented backlash every year from several segments of society, ranging from politicians, religious scholars, actors, and even some rights activists and veteran feminists. This backlash is laced with unusual ferocity because the women hold posters and placards containing slogans with sexual connotations. The critics of the March say that women’s self-expression is vile, immoral, and against Pakistani culture, values, traditions, and religion. Third, soon after the March, its women organizers start receiving threats of violence, rape, and even death. A parliamentarian of the ruling party urged the government to initiate an inquiry against the March organizers to find out who was behind the movement to hold them responsible for exercising their constitutional rights. Another lawmaker from Sindh filed a complaint against the organizers for promoting vulgarity. The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly went a step ahead and passed a unanimous resolution against *Aurat* March and condemned the “shameless and un-Islamic” slogans, placards, and demands of the procession.

Some of the most notorious slogans of the March were: “*Mera Jism Meri Marzi*” (My body my choice), *Khana khud garm karo* (heat up the food yourself), “Keep your dick pics to yourself”, “*Mein awaara, Mein baddchalan*” (I loiter, I’m characterless), “*Divorced and happy*” and “*Anything you can do, I do while bleeding*” etc.

Additionally, *Aurat* March seeks to provide an alternative to the prevailing liberal feminist discourse, characteristic of previous eras of state and NGO co-opted activism, by explicitly including questions of class, imperialism, and widespread oppression of the weak by the powerful under the mantle of “women’s issues”. Another objective is to bring a new feminist agenda and narrative into the mainstream. While describing the *Aurat* March, feminists were divided into liberal progressive and socialist feminist groups. Both factions agreed that body politics is the need of the time and is essential for furthering women’s issues.

The organizers also viewed it as an interclass organic feminist movement, with women from different social and economic classes actively participating. They acknowledged that although many of the organizing committee members were from the middle and upper classes, there were many others from diverse backgrounds whose contributions were imperative. The March was also attended by students from marginalized areas, women from Katchi Abadis (informal settlements, slums), women doing minority work, and women representing labour unions, and trans-activists. There was also diversity across religions, genders, and ethnicity. The March was deemed inclusive and embraced everyone who was progressive and wished to contribute to the feminist movement in Pakistan. They see *Aurat* March as a potential platform to bring more long-lasting and transformative change for the many who can’t even think of raising their voices.

The organizers claim that the current wave of feminism, of which the *Aurat* March is a crucial focal point, differs from previous movements because it functions without compulsions, obligations, or the need for patronage from the state or other influential groups. To them, this

movement is radically different from the earlier women's movements because it is organic; it spurred from within and was not led by any single organization, and it did not push any specific political ideology. They emphasise when the movements are independent of any pressures or patronage, they are better poised to present their own narrative more freely. Secondly, the March does not demand concessions from the state; it challenges all the oppressive structures and ideologies which need the attention from the whole of society.

Gender-based discrimination, violence against women, and physical and sexual abuse are rampant in the country. Pakistan is lagging on almost all economic and human development indicators and has been ranked as the 3rd to last country on the Gender Development Index (GDI) and the 6th most dangerous place for women in the world. In this context, *Aurat* March 2019 was considered by feminists as a historical moment. It was the first time that women openly brought up issues regarding sexuality, sexual and reproductive health, consent, marriage and divorce, and the body in the public sphere. These topics have traditionally been silenced and relegated to the private sphere, with women deeply impacted by sexual violence and harassment burdened with fear and insecurity. The 2019 March broke taboos by enabling women to address issues that they face every day in the vicinity of their homes, in the markets, at work, and in public without fear or shame. Posters and placards referring to reproductive health and menstruation, to those demanding the shutting down of unsolicited content online, brought issues pushed into the realm of the private to the streets.

Backlash against *Aurat* March

Aurat March was revolutionary in how vocal it was; slogans were chanted about the violence against women and demands for an end to the abuse. The opponents wasted no time in explaining how women's agency could not exist in Pakistani culture as Pakistani values, traditions, and religion are premised on women's silence. Feminists and activists gave their views on why the *Aurat* March received exceptionally aggressive and violent reactions from so many people. According to Kishwar Naheed, a poet and activist said, the reason behind the backlash against *Aurat* March can be summed up in one line: "Why the women went ahead of time."

Feminists believe the *Aurat* March has garnered such a strong response because of the many ways in which it differs from the movement in previous eras. For the first time, instead of limiting their demands to specific reforms or concessions, they used the March to address their experiences in society, bringing up notions of sexuality and body autonomy in the public, an issue seldom discussed previously. The March served to critique the systems underpinning society as a whole, as opposed to specific policies, which hit close to home as activists highlighted men's complicity towards women's sexual subservience, even in cases where men are allies, revealing instances of benign sexism. Unearthing deep systemic issues created a shift in the narrative surrounding women's demands; it positioned all members of society as complicit in women's subjugation. With the critique aimed at society as whole, backlash has rebounded from multiple segments that feel under attack.

Another reason for the backlash is the crucial shift in the narrative in this third wave which has repositioned women as agents and not victims. The *Aurat* March has been a deeply assertive movement: women aim to reclaim public space, power, and their rights by taking to the streets, as opposed to asking for them. Organisers of the March suggest that when a woman asserts herself, there is always a strong reaction from society, citing examples of Malala or Mukhtar Mai. When women adopt "victim-mode", society is more receptive as this is a more palatable role. When a

woman challenges the atrocities she faces or registers a FIR and comes out in the public, then she is torn apart, as she is considered a threat to the system.

In Pakistani society, a woman is considered the property of man, is identified in relation to a man, and her sexuality is subordinate to his. A woman cannot claim her sexuality and bodily autonomy independent of her relationship with a man. Another reason for the magnitude of the backlash against the March is due to the “Mera Jism Meri Marzi” chant, which translates to “my body, my choice”. This demand for control over one’s sexuality and reproductive health threatens the family system which is a core organizational pillar in Pakistani society. The ‘paradigm of control’ gets threatened when women assert “I belong to myself” ; relinquishing identifying oneself with relation to man not only threatens the family system but also questions the role men play in society as caretakers, custodians, and breadwinners. The feminist awakening has provided women with many new avenues for expression and self-identification but threatens the roles that men, and in some cases women, traditionally play in society. The vitriol that assertions of bodily autonomy and expressions of independent sexuality garner, can then said to stem from the fear of losing one’s place in society.

“When women express their sexuality, or talk about autonomy of their body, the pro status quo forces get insecure, because the hierarchy of the status quo is built on the subservience of women, and people are programmed to react strongly when this hierarchy is challenged.” Fouzia Saeed said conclusively in the interview with researchers.

The victims of online trolling and threats say that their resolve has only strengthened. They are more committed than ever before to body politics and want to break the taboo surrounding women’s sexuality.

The organizers of the Aurat March have also termed “the March” as the third wave of feminism in Pakistan. It was

the first time that women from all segments of society joined to air grievances stemming from their specific experiences living under patriarchal conditions; and the reaction of this scale was generated because women addressed problems in the system by pointing to daily micro-aggressions and instances of sexism. They addressed the system by pointing to daily instances that occur in the lives of women from all backgrounds, linking the specific to the universal. This method, while successfully pointing towards systemic causes, also seems to challenge individual perpetrators at a personal level. Organisers have often been asked about the appropriateness and exigency of slogans used in the March such as ‘Khana khud garm karo’ (heat up your own food). These slogans are able to probe the division of labour at home and in the institution of the family; by connecting the universal to the specific, they addressed individuals and their relationship to the system at a personal level. They believe that feminism is the only political struggle which not only challenges the state as an abstract entity but also questions the immediate relations within the family

Afiya Sheharbano Zia is one of the few authors and academics who have produced work on women’s sexuality and body politics in Pakistan. As a feminist and academic with over 25 years of contributions to the feminist movement, they saw the controversial slogans and placards as a sign of women becoming more politically active and aware, connecting their lived realities with the wider political sphere. The “Personal is Political” is being brought to the front and centre in Pakistan—a massive stride forward. Zia sees the backlash as inevitable, stating that:

“Aurat March became a threat because the slogans they chanted were thought to be a threat to the state. Small politics and large politics are terms of anthropology, politics with small P and politics with big P. The Aurat March may have been a small P but as old feminists, we insist that it must connect with the big P. The slogans chanted in the Aurat March were not mere slogans; those were the demands for equality and freedom from patriarchal subjugation. Through social and electronic media, it is inculcated into people that they should look at the slogans only superficially and not dig deep into politics behind these slogans. The agenda behind the politics of these slogans needs to be understood.”

The organizers knew these slogans would attract backlash and false accusations, but they reject these allegations and ignore this backlash completely. Their stance remains that the March was premised on intersectionality entirely with organizers and attendees including both trans people and men. The female attendees came up with these slogans themselves, but the way in which they have been received by society has pointed to a severe lack of understanding of sexuality and the body in society, suggesting that there is a greater need for discussion on the topic to be normalized in healthy and accessible ways.

The organizers of the March who faced severe online backlash resolved to continue their struggle and they believe that their movement can't be silenced by scaring them. However, to counter these attacks they approached multiple sources for their protection and support due to the more atrocious reactions from several factions of society. The police were informed, and the organizers even sought support from progressive politicians and parliamentarians. Some young organizers contacted Bilawal Bhutto (Chairman of Pakistan People's Party) to seek support and bring his attention to the resolution against Aurat March which was tabled by the PPP's woman parliamentarian—Nighat Orakzai—in KP Assembly. The Assembly passed a unanimous resolution against what they deemed “shameless and un-Islamic” slogans, placards, and demands raised at Women's Day marches in major cities across the country. However, Bilawal Bhutto issued a statement in support of *Aurat* March and sought explanation from Nighat Orkzai and also reprimanded her for going against the party's policy. Although the *Aurat* March has received a great amount of backlash due to the approaches they have taken, the backlash has enabled conversations with these centres of power. Organizers believe that their continued efforts, despite this criticism, will help carry the movement forward.

To summarize, the third wave of feminism, of which the *Aurat* March is a crux has garnered backlash and violent criticism for several reasons: it addresses systemic issues in society as opposed a singular state policy, urging for deep structural changes in society. In addition to this, by bringing bodily autonomy and female sexuality to the forefront it threatens the power of certain crucial institutions and renders individual roles irrelevant. The March is also seen as a threat because of its assertive nature, viewing women as agents and not victims, and its diverse member-base manages to target every individual's personal relationship to a system that subjugates women. Despite the amount of backlash, the movement continues to work towards addressing these issues, with the criticism revealing what needs to be worked upon, and how the movement can strategize and evolve.

Conversation with Religious Right about *Aurat* March and Feminism

Despite the *Aurat* March facing vehement opposition from all segments of society, the most blatant and vocal comes from the religious right. Men and women from the religious right viewed the *Aurat* March from a religious standpoint and deemed it antithetical to the religious and social values of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. When Dr. Farhat Hashmi was contacted—the Canada based founder of Al-Huda, an organization which runs religious schools and seminaries—she refused to participate in the research. Her organization explained why they do not believe in feminism and do not support any activities related to *Aurat* March:

“We have studied your questionnaire and we feel that Al-Huda International is an educational and welfare organization and does not have an expertise in responding to such matters. We as a nation are citizens of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and our actions as a nation should embody Islamic morals and values. Allah (s.w.t) has specified roles of men and women in the Quran and Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w) has explained and guided regarding every matter in detail. We need to implement the divine laws in our lives as individuals and collectively as a nation. A Muslim woman has been given a very dignified role in the society as a daughter, wife and mother and we need to study and implement it in our lives to be successful in this world and in the Hereafter.”

Most men and women from the religious right interviewed for this research analysed feminism and the most recent *Aurat* March (2019) through a similar religious framework. The consensus among them was that the slogans chanted in the March were vile, immodest, and against Islamic and Pakistani cultural values. The Council of Islamic Ideology (CII) chairman stressed that there is a dire need to examine these slogans and see if Islamic and family values are on the verge of collapse. The chairman held a special meeting at CII to review the situation. He could not understand why women spoke of sexuality in the public and claimed that the family institution and social fabric was in crisis.

The chairman CII considered *Aurat* March as an elitist intervention, not grounded in the grassroots. He stated that issues raised in the *Aurat* March are not the issues of most women of Pakistan. According to him, the slogans such as “look for your own socks”, “heat up the food”, and “I will warm your bed”, are worrisome and require CII’s attention as they point to the deterioration of the family system, relationships between men and women, and husbands and wives. The slogan “My body my choice”, should not be looked at in isolation but needs to be studied in the context of deterioration of a value system and considered the demand a call for free consensual sex outside of marriage.

A female Dean of a public university refused to be interviewed, expressing her dismay at why supervisors at universities allow their students to undertake research on issues that are culturally and religiously inappropriate. Ironically, women from the religious right showed more resistance to discuss the issue than their male counterparts. This shows that women are perhaps a step ahead in accepting and internalizing their secondary role in the society, and reinforces the idea that the lack of identification vis-à-vis men and prescribed gender roles which the March calls for, threatens women as well as men.

The former Nazim of Jamiat Talaba-e-Islam and member of Jamat-e-Islami disapproved of *Aurat* March and contended that slogans raised by a “few shameless women” do not represent women living in an Islamic society. He urged the government to investigate the immodest

behaviour of women exhibited at the March, stating that the March is backed by a “western agenda” and ought to be exposed. Elaborating on the *Aurat* March’s agenda, he considered the movement a conspiracy to damage Islam and the country’s ideological foundations, alongside Pakistani cultural values. He stressed that if women become immoral and immodest, it is the duty of the men in society to correct their behaviour.

Another respondent from this group found it inappropriate for women to chant such slogans and voiced their disapproval of it by saying that no decent society would endorse these, that it would be immoral conduct irrespective of gender. According to them, slogans such as ‘my body, my choice’ are a natural outcome of the secular education which is inherited from the British and French colonialism.

One of the right-wing respondents, a former Vice Chancellor of Islamic International University, Islamabad, believed *Aurat* March to be an unfortunate outcome of colonization which has transformed the nation from family-centred to self-centred. According to him, “Islam gives us a sense of belonging to family and society. Positivist secular western paradigm reduces us to “individuals”. He opined that people have become not only self-centred, but materialistic; they are deprived of human compassion, love, cordiality, sacrifice, service, and empathy; I-ness and my-ness takes over we-ness and togetherness. In his view, capitalism and materialism have given society the gift of individualism and consequently people are able to talk in terms of “my body, my car, my refrigerator, my life, and my personal time”.

The respondents acknowledged that the Quran has very clearly stated that believers have to observe ethical conduct regardless of gender. It does not say that only women have to be observant, while men can be as licentious as possible; it asks both to act ethically. It recognizes the presence of sexual attraction, while recognizing the centrality of family: adhering to the Quran’s code of conduct for sexual relationships between man and wife is part of piety. Members of the religious right that were surveyed acknowledge the need for discussions on sex, depending on the context. The where and how these discussions take place is of great importance, with Islam permitting them to approach these subjects but with appropriate decorum dictated by the Quran of Hadith, using language which is not “provocative” or “obscene”, in closed quarters.

Additionally, they believe that it is unethical for two individuals to think as separate individuals after making a public contract in the form of a marriage. Islam bestows freedom of will upon everyone, however, after a contractual arrangement has been made between two persons as husband and wife, it becomes a matter of mutual understanding, trust, sacrifice, love, compassion, and togetherness. They don’t remain just two individuals, after getting married but become a single family unit. Therefore, the idea of ‘my body my choice’ undermines the sanctity of marriage. It is an imported concept from the capitalist-positivist societies.

The religious right considers feminism western propaganda, a conspiracy against values, traditions, and Islamic beliefs because of its liberal and secular ideas about women’s rights, equality, oppression, and subjugation. It is often termed as Bad or Hyper Feminism. The religious right—including Islamic feminists (if any)—insist on a religious framework to determine the strategy, demands, and decorum of a movement asking for women’s rights. As such, its ideas of women’s rights exist within the Islamic moral values which are derived from the source, i.e., the Quran and Sunnah. This section of society looks at feminism as a foreign ideology touted by a club of promiscuous misandrists, and finds it alien, irrelevant, and a threat to Islamic or Pakistani society.

An almost unanimous claim from the right wing remains that Feminism in Pakistan is an elitist movement started by elitist women. They believe the entire concept of feminist movement

is misleading in the context of Pakistan due to the nature of the problems Pakistan faces. The movement is frequently criticised for not addressing or involving the problems of Pakistan's "poor, underprivileged, uneducated" women; their emancipation should be a priority for the movement according to the religious right. In addition to this, members of the religious right have agreed that men need to be sensitized toward women's needs, increasing awareness of rights accorded by Islam (i.e., inheritance rights). However, they view the feminist movement as one that consists solely of women belonging to affluent families whose demands are limited to wanting to wear revealing garments and move freely with no barriers of social and religious traditions and no effort to "uplift" women from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Additionally, they believe displays and discussions of sexuality are detrimental to the cause. They think feminism in Pakistan or elsewhere in the world does not bring freedom or respect to women but is responsible for the exploitation of women's sexuality which is the outcome of the "unbridled liberties" it stands for. The terms sexuality or reproductive health, for them, evoke images of a society where pornography, night clubs, dancing, and other "immoral" acts are normalized. They believe these to be disrespectful and view these freedoms as counterproductive and servicing to men.

Respondents from the religious right countered liberal and secular feminism by arguing that feminism is not a popular movement even in western societies and use critiques of the movement by sociologists and anthropologists to support their ideas. The idea that the feminist movement emerged in the West, and anti-feminist movements emerged in response in Europe and America is often cited to discredit the movement.

The respondents from religious right insist that feminism is relevant in western societies but not in societies like Pakistan:

"I believe that in societies which follow a European society model, the emergence of feminism was a natural phenomenon. But in societies where that cultural, epistemic, historical background does not exist, feminism is something that is external and which cannot gel with the culture and society. Unfortunately, it's not only your topic. Most of the young MS or PhD scholars come up with findings that are then studied, analysed and concluded in a paradigm which is very suitable for an empiricist environment, where empirical reality is the only reality; there is no room for any ethical moral, cultural values." Dr Anis the vice chancellor of Riphah University expressed.

One of the respondents from the religious right emphasised that social issues are non-binary issues whereas Islam addresses society as a whole: it does not divide people into men and women. According to the respondent, feminists are obsessed with gender slogans, while male chauvinists are obsessed with male superiority; he considered both as wrong and expressed that Islamic culture and faith does not allow such movements because Islamic justice is not simply for women or men. It is for the whole of humanity and different paradigms are needed to address issues of different cultures.

There was a consensus among the research participants from the religious right that feminism is an implant and a foreign idea. Many vocal opponents of feminism and *Aurat* March declined to be part of the research after knowing the topic of research.

Conclusion

Aurat March 2019 created a moral panic in Pakistan, sparked by marchers holding posters and placards with slogans such as *Mera Jism Meri Marzi*, *Happily Divorced*, *Khana Khud Garm Karo*, *Bister Main Garm Kar Doon Gi* and *main Awara Main Bad Chalan* etc. Feminists and young organizers of the *Aurat* March received death and rape threats in a tidal wave of massive harassment and trolling online, facing intense backlash from all groups in society, in both print and electronic media. The slogans were considered provocative, obscene, and immoral; they were seen as an insult to Pakistani religious and cultural values. However, the feminists maintained that these placards exposed the inherent fragility of patriarchal structures and opened avenues for a new wave of feminism which finally raised issues of sexual violence, the division of labour, and oppression at the hands of their immediate relations. They consider the reaction a manifestation of the growing intolerance in a society that is still operating based on outdated patriarchal values and which systemically oppresses women. These slogans were embedded in the lived realities of women, and by focusing on the specific, drew to attention to the universal, resulting in an all-around critique of structural inequalities in society.

Critiques from the very same irate society frequently analyse important issues such as women's rights, violence against women, sexual harassment, abuse, and access to public space voyeuristically. For instance, the slogan '*Mera Jism Meri Marzi*' triggered a morality debate in the country because women's bodies are seen as inherently sexual objects, regardless of age, location, dress code, etc. The slogan was used by several feminists to show the autonomy and protection from unwarranted advances women championed, celebrating women's agency. But the interpretation was distorted; the choice made by the opponents in interpreting the slogan revealed more about their biases and tensions in society regarding sexuality. Women are viewed in this scheme according to the Madonna-Whore complex: either the female body is sexualized and seen as inherently sinful or as a sacred (as is the case with mothers). This includes any talk of reproductive health or rights, because these are considered inherently sexual for women. The oscillation between guilt and shame from the blurring of the binary caused an explosion of rage.

The all-around unprecedented moral panic and violent reaction reinforces the argument that *Aurat* March has managed to strike precisely at deep-seated insecurities and critical fissures in society, revealing and making structural issues clear to the public. Through the *Aurat* March, Pakistani feminism has been regenerated, picking up from where its predecessors left off in the 1980s. It can be argued that the March is the descendant of the WAF protests and will be remembered accordingly by historians. The March represents a third wave of feminism with its most pressing concerns located in the body, in sexuality, and in challenging private and structural patriarchy. It differs from previous eras because of its focus on intersectionality, grassroots activism, and its assertive nature that focuses on society and each individual's role in the structure as opposed to making specific demands from specific actors.

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