

## **Aurat March: A Transformed Feminist Movement in Pakistan Since 2018**

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### **Abstract**

This study attempted to explain the major agendas of Aurat March. Aurat March organizers were interviewed to understand their narrative and agendas of Aurat March. Interviews are analyzed through thematic analysis. This study is also focused to know the outcomes of Aurat Marches in terms of policy making in Pakistan. Aurat March is the continuity of the legacy of the feminist movement in Pakistan. This paper explains the development and revitalization of the feminist movement in Pakistan. This paper throw light on the struggles between current feminist movements and religious community in Pakistan. Aurat Marches upholds women's rights through the lens of lawful empowerment. Regardless of its feat in initiating debates and rising consciousness about gender inequities in Pakistan, I want present an analysis that whether those debates and concerns have any impact on the policy making in Pakistan.

**Keywords:** Aurat March, Patriarchal Structure, 8th March & Policy Making.

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### **1. Introduction**

The main determination behind Aurat March is to observe International Women's day. Internationally, 8th March is celebrated as International Women's day. Women all over the world despite of economic, cultural, linguistic, ethnic and political differences celebrate 8th March every year in various ways. Women around the globe celebrate 8th March in the memory of decades long fight for parity, integrity, peace, and progress for women. International Women's Day is the tale of all women struggled to participate in society equally along with men. In primordial Greece, Lysistrata started a strike to end the French war. Later during the Treaty of Versailles women demanded suffrage to get equal rights and liberty. The thought of an International Women's Day initially came up at the start of 20th century - the era of peak industrialization where world was going through expansion, population rise, commotion, and radicalism. With the emergence of Socialist Party in USA in 1909, first National Woman's Day was celebrated on 28 February. In 1910, meeting was held at Copenhagen where the Socialist established women's day internationally, to strengthen their struggles and to help them in getting universal suffrage. The motion was hailed with undivided agreement by 100 women from 17 different countries, but no specific date was selected.

In 1912 following the decision that has been taken at Copenhagen International Women's Day was commemorated in Denmark, Austria, Switzerland and Germany, where bulk of people attended the rallies. In 1912 women demanded equal right to work and to end discrimination at work place. Russian women celebrated first Women's Day on last Sunday of February for peace and ending the war in 1913. Although in Europe women's day was observed on 8th March, where women expressed their solidarity with their sisters in the war torn areas. Since then Women's Day has been observed internationally every year giving a new dimension to understand women's problems and to ensure equal rights to women globally.

Aurat Marches in Pakistan is the celebration of International Women's Day. As like the international movement it is focused on equal rights for women in Pakistan. Aurat March within few years appeared as the

emblem of voices of in Pakistan. It is celebrated in various cities of Pakistan in different ways, to support women opinions and raise consciousness of women's rights. Aurat March provides as joint forum for like-minded people struggling for women's rights and status in society. It is a non-funded movement for a collective cause to uplift the status of women in Pakistan. The major interests of Aurat March organizers and participants are mainly focused on, to educate about women's issues like domestic violence, equal pay, reproductive rights, harassment, maternity leave, acid attacks, and sexual assault. Aurat March also want to connect feminist movement with women from each class through common local narrative and understanding. Basically Aurat March works against the patriarchal norms of Pakistani society and to rise women's rights violations through easy and simple narrative. Aurat March participants bring their own slogans and placards to express their experiences of discrimination and inequality in the society. One of their aims is to highlight the ruthlessness of patriarchal structures in Pakistan. Aurat March is a volunteer movement to engage women about their rights, against patriarchy, to reclaim their public spaces, political rights and economic rights.

## **2. Agendas of Aurat March:**

The rights of women in Pakistan have been a longstanding point of both scholarly inquiry and broader public debate. Since the Zia ul Haq era, for instance, the question of how Islamic legal norms infringe, undermine the realization of fundamental rights granted to women has been a significant source of public and intellectual contestation. In the age of the #MeToo movement, the importance of such rights has acquired a renewed critical focus on the structural, social and cultural factors which continue gender disparities in Pakistan. Violence, harassment, intimidation and discrimination experienced by women in the workplace as well as in public and private spaces are also under the spotlight. This critical focus has decidedly looked to legal reform as a fundamental instrument towards the realization of a more just and equitable future in gender relations in Pakistan.

The Aurat March which first took place in Karachi, Islamabad and Lahore in 2018 to observe International Women's Day on 8th March. The march gradually evolved into a movement with women across Pakistan coming together to demand legal, social, political and cultural reforms. In the past two years, the march has been divided into different geography-based chapters. The Lahore chapter has been responsible for producing comprehensive manifestos targeting different themes in relation to women's development. The Karachi chapter held an extensive social media campaign to bring awareness to gender violence. All respective chapters have a common underlying goal: collective action that translates into better livelihoods for women. The organizers furthermore approach the concept of collective action through a holistic framework arguing that the mitigation of the system of oppression is connected. The Islamabad chapter focus on the legal rights of women in private and public spheres.

Aurat Marches are striving for new legislation as well as many more legal reforms to existing laws for the protection and progress of women. The three major acts are being focused by Aurat March throughout their struggle including Workplace Harassment Act 2010, Anti Rape Ordinance 2020 and Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929. In Lahore 2021, Aurat March, elaborated the inherent errors with the introduction of the Anti-Rape Ordinance. Anti-Rape Ordinance is focused to establish special courts for rapists to conduct the trials and orders to cover up of the identity of victims and lets for the chemical castration of some offenders. The Lahore Marchers argues that "medicalized interventions to prevent sexual assault, such as physical and chemical castration of those who commit sexual offences, is a short-term solution that perpetuates the faulty notion that rape is a crime of sexual desire rather than power." Lahore Marchers made this point that there is a simple lack of research and medical proof to prove that chemical castration would drop sexual crimes and reoffending. Protection of Women at Workplace was also demanded for working women that operate within "formal, informal and semiformal sectors" and include "independent and sub-contract workers within written or other contracts" in 2020 Aurat March at Lahore. The 2021 Lahore manifesto looked at additional reinforcement of the Act. Despite the compulsory provisions existent in the Act, organizers argued that "most hospitals do not have functional sexual harassment committees." Lastly, the issue of child marriage is always raised with the demand to increase the minimum age of marriage for all women must be 18 in Pakistan.

Every year Aurat March receive divided and mixed response from public. In spite of its success in generating debates about gender inequality in Pakistan, getting support at home and internationally, but this movement and its organizers and supporters face significant encounters. On other hand Islamist groups criticize the march's campaigners and organizers as depraved or erroneous blasphemers, while others see

Aurat March as an offshoot of western cultural imperialism. Even the country's popular PM also linked the increase of rape cases to women's dressing.

### **3. Aurat March and Religion:**

A broader change is needed to understand women's narrative and their problems in each segment of society for which Aurat March has been assembling men and women for the cause of women's rights since 2018 in Pakistan. Aurat March has focused on assembling women from down trodden divisions of society like lower socio-economic class and religious minorities yet their existence is still limited to selective cities. Aurat March has to reach rural areas where gender disparities are worse.

One of the criticism against the Aurat March from the religious segment in Pakistani society is this basic dichotomy that Islam and feminism is irreconcilably opposite. Actually in Pakistan, Islam is very smoothly amalgamated with culture due to certain systematic similarities, resulting in such a patriarchal cultural lens seeing feminist narrative in contradiction with Islamic traditions. That patriarchal culture has been deeply rooted in Pakistani society and those who challenge it are blamed as blasphemous. Such allegations come from a large segment of society because in Pakistan, for majority religion and culture is the center of collective identity. In such situations feminists' movements like Aurat March are ineffective and misunderstood, until and unless the feminists integrate their narrative of equality and modernity with Islam and culture. The disconnection between Aurat March and religion is a huge hurdle in making the gender equal society in Pakistan.

Muslim women all over the world have been trying to bridge the gap between women's rights and Islam for the wellbeing and progress of women. In this context in Pakistan, Asma Barlas and Dr. Riffat Hassan have made substantial contributions to re-interpret the Qur'anic texts from a non-patriarchal perspective and have laid down a strong foundation for Islamic feminism in the country.

### **4. Structuration of Aurat March:**

The Aurat March is a non-hierarchical structure and leadership in Pakistan. The annual Aurat March is their signature event; but the movement is engaged in other actions and struggles as well. Aurat March activists write their own manifesto every year manifesto to eloquently express their demands to the government and society.

Art and performance are also added to marches to intensify women's issues and demands. Live drama performances, speeches, poems and songs to express women's status, problems and needs in Pakistan are the compulsory components of Aurat March. Unfortunately, very few media channels deliver the real message of Aurat March, as most of the channels are looking for something sensational and controversial to increase their views. Like every year on every media platform the placards are highly discussed which are mostly brought by the participants themselves, which means every participant are bringing their own idea of understanding the problem of discrimination with women. After intense backlash in the first two years Aurat March now train their activist how to respond to media in order to avoid stirring controversy which blur the main agenda.

March activists are trained and organized for the day of 8th March. This march is completely based on non-violent policy, which discussed prior to the march day and announced on that for the participants as well. The core team of Aurat March circulate the message for public who wants to volunteer for any of the included tasks like campaign, security, funds collection, and performances 2-3 months before the March through various social medias like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp. Every volunteer is included. The preparation of March started with the initial meetings to discuss the agendas and theme of the March like in 2023 the theme of the March was climate crisis and its impact over women. Majority of the volunteers are young age people especially students. University students from rural areas are highly welcome to join due to their connectivity to rural areas which makes them more clear about the issues of women in the rural areas as up till now these marches are limited to cities only. The Aurat March has taken on board legal experts to handle legal matters during and after the annual march. In terms of funding, Aurat March is independent

entity as majority of the funds are collected through individual donations. Aurat March are also accused to taking foreign funds but no evidence has been found yet.

### **5. Backlashes to Aurat March:**

It is strenuous for majority of men and women in Pakistani society to understand and digest that women are openly expressing their rage about patriarchal structure and their voices to end it. Aurat March emerged in organized form in public in 2018 in Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi and since then it is believed that it is a western agenda followed by elite class women in Pakistan. Aurat March organizers and activists are often labelled as foreign funded agents posing threat to the traditional values of Pakistan.

In 2018 and 2019, many slogans and placards were criticized that those ideas and demands are not aligned with Pakistani culture and society. Mostly the slogans and placards were highly discussed on media channels. In 2020, marchers developed new, clearer, and culturally aligned slogans but placards cannot be streamlined by marchers because most of the participants bring their own placards. On many platforms activists were given the chance to elucidate the catchphrases at numerous public forums with diverse audience.

Another major challenge facing by Aurat March has specifically been the reaction of conservative groups in the society of Pakistan. This year 2023, various petitions were submitted to Lahore, Islamabad and Karachi high courts to ban the march. Islamabad and Karachi courts dismissed those petitions, allowing the march to be conducted. Although the Lahore March took place with lots of hurdles and restrictions. One of the organizer said that the hatred towards Aurat March and its narrative is causing mental health issues among organizers and participants due to the threatening and defaming gestures from the society. Actually these marches are threat to the established structure of patriarchy because it ultimately challenges the power structure of the society which is majorly held by men. One of the participant point out that we women are being targeted and shamed for joining the march. She added that some women, myself included, have lost friends because of our participation in the march.

Women in Pakistan are more vulnerable to injustice and violence due to their exclusion from social, political and economic institutions. Women are 49% of Pakistan's, and only 22% are in the country's labor force and only 18% receives their labor income. Only 5% of women are holding senior leadership positions in the economy. Only 20% of women are in the parliament of Pakistan. In the police force, women are only 2% and stark under-representation in the superior courts of the country.

The major role of women's exposure to violence is their economic dependency on their husbands, fathers, or brothers. Pakistan is a traditional society in which women are assigned with the household chores, and societally women are discouraged to work outside their homes. Work places and public spaces are not safe for women which ultimately hinder women from participation in informal and formal economy. Most of the women labor force largely constitute the informal economy, where incomes are awfully low and which further increase economic vulnerability of women in the society. Culturally men hold the authority over household income and properties, making women weaker and dependent economically. Pakistan cultural setup believe that women should tolerate more to keep the family together, leaves women not only to more violence but also unable of escape.

Aurat March revolutionized the whole Pakistani culture about women through their manifesto and slogans against patriarchy and inequality. The opponents of Aurat March tried really hard to explain that Pakistani culture, customs and religion is based on silencing women and giving authority to men. Due to which the voices of Aurat March activists faced intensive and violent reaction and criticism. According to feminists, Aurat March has gathered a very strong response because it is different from the earlier feminists' movements in Pakistan. Preliminary, just demanding to specific reforms or rights, Aurat March provide a forum to address women's experiences in society, talks about their body autonomy, their rights in public and private spaces, and many more such issues which were not discussed by the early feminist movements. Aurat March actually pin point all kind of discriminations with women due to their powerlessness in homes and public spaces. Spotting the profound systemic problems formed a change in the chronicle of women's needs and demands. As the narrative raised by marches meant at society as whole including homes too, hostile response also rebound from various segments of the society who feel under attack. One of the other reason for

the backlash towards March, is the decisive change in the chronicle of this third wave feminism which has moved women from victim to the agents of change in the patriarchal setup. From the platform of Aurat March, women are reclaiming their political power, public spaces, societal status, and economic share by taking every step for it instead of just asking for their rights. One of the organizer said, that when a woman proclaims herself, there is always a strong reaction from society, but when she adopt victim mode society is more sympathetic. Women who challenges the atrocities of the state or law are considered as threat to the system. Women are unfortunately considering as men's property and her sexuality is subjugating to men. In a patriarchal structure like Pakistan, it's difficult for women to claim their sexuality and bodily autonomy independent of men. This is main reason behind the rigorous backlash against the slogan of "Mera Jism Meri Marzi", which interprets to "my body, my choice". The demand to have authority over one's sexuality and body choices is a threat to the family system in Pakistan. This narrative of "my body, my choice" also give many avenues of self-identification to women which threaten the role of men and in certain cases of women in the society. "When women express their sexuality, or talk about autonomy of their body, the pro status quo forces get diffident, because the order of the status quo is constructed on the subservience of women, and people are automated to react muscularly when this hierarchy is challenged." Fouzia Saeed said decisively in her interview. "Aurat March became a threat because the slogans they chanted were thought to be a threat to the state. 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 medias, 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." One of the march activists said that the majority female participants bring their own placards expressing their problems in the society but the way they are being understand is clearly showing the lack of understanding body autonomy and women's rights telling that there is a greater need for discussion in healthy and reachable ways. Many of the organizers highlight the issues of facing hatred and backlash online but they are firm to stand for their issues. Precisely, Aurat March has gathered hatred and disparagement for many grounds as it highlighted structured problems in society demanding for structural changes in society. The March is also understood as a menace due of its firm nature, seeing women as agents and not victims, and its versatile members accomplishes to hit every individual's relationship to a system that vanquishes women.

## **6. Why Aurat March:**

Initially after independence, the mainstream feminist movements in Pakistan were focused on reforms based struggle, which shifted to secularist politics for women's rights in 1980's resisting Zia Islamization policies. Later in 1990's and after war on terror era, the feminist movements shifted from one phase to another, emerged in the current shape of Aurat March. One of its most loudest slogans is "mera jism, meri marzi", explaining to "my body, my choice", a catchphrase which has flashed debates and disputes on the ground, online, in the media, and in academic and non-academic discussions. The 1990s and early 2000s, feminist movement in Pakistan diffused due to introduction of NGO's and takeover of the movement by state bodies. Nevertheless, since 2018, international women's day has been celebrated every year with new structure, manifesto and demands, raising questions about patriarchal structure, taking their public spaces and raising slogans of women's equality. Aurat March has been picking new theme every year on 8th March since 2018 in Pakistan. This movement is based on the collective struggle of women coming with different identities to struggle against oppression and suppression of women within the private and communal spheres. The March is seen as sign of change as it is the first ever organic movement in which its organizers and participants declined to stay silent on women issues. Every year Aurat March in Pakistan is severely by various segments of the society. The March is noteworthy in various ways. Firstly, it is a comprehensive event organized by diverse groups of women, men, and trans-people from all walks of life in many cities of Pakistan every year. Secondly, the March is being criticized every year by religious scholars, politicians, journalists, actors, veteran feminists even human right activists. For the opponents of the March women occupying streets is revolting, wicked, and against Pakistani values, ethos, religion and customs. Thirdly, the march organizers and activists, receives threats after march every year. They being criticized on many grounds like promoting vulgarity, western funded, shameless and un-Islamic. Some of the March placards that erupt the anger in public were with the words as, "Mera Jism Meri Marzi" means "My body my choice", "Khana khud garm karo" means "heat up the food yourself", "Keep your dick pics to yourself", "Mein awaara, Mein baddchalan" means "I loiter, I'm characterless", "Divorced and happy" and "Anything you can do, I do while bleeding" etc. Moreover, Aurat March is not just an struggle by elite women but it does include questions of imperialism, class structure, violence, and coercion of weak by powerful. While explain Aurat

March, feminists divided into socialist feminists and liberal progressive since 2022. Both blocs agree on the question of body politics and raising issues of women in Pakistan. Aurat March is an intergroup organic feminist movement, in which women from unlike economic and social classes participate. Every year March is attended by women from slums, students from diverse backgrounds, women from labor unions, working class women, and trans rights activists. Majority of the March participants sees march as platform to bring transformative change for women in Pakistan. According to March organizers the current feminist movement in the shape of Aurat March is different as it is an organic, self-made movement without the influence of any political ideology. They stress on the point that independent movements are more free in structuring their narrative and claims. Furthermore, women through the March are not demanding concessions from the state; it challenges oppressive systems and beliefs which need the attention from the whole of society. Pakistan is the 3rd to last country on the Gender Development Index (GDI) and the 6th most unsafe country for women in the world. These matters have usually been shushed and demoted to the secluded sphere, but due to Aurat March every year issues are opening up at home and public levels. These Aurat March destitute taboos by empowering women to address issues which they face every day in their homes, in the marketplaces, at work, and in public without fear or shame.

## **7. Conclusion:**

Aurat March is an initiative by young feminists to mark International Women's day. It is a non-hierarchical volunteer movement for the cause of women empowerment. Aurat March is a struggle to raise awareness about women's problems in a patriarchal society like Pakistan. By taking this movement to street via Aurat March, this march aims to reclaim women's rights in public and private spaces. Actually Aurat March is step forward to the previous feminists' movements by claiming public spaces and including diverse group of people especially youngsters Through Aurat March, women demand social reforms in the challenging patriarchal structures.

Every year, the slogans, posters and placards of Aurat March remain provocative and stir debates in online and offline spaces because the language used by activists and participants is witty, was upfront, candid, sarcastic, humorous and uttered ways to signify their issues instead of being victim and looking for sympathies. Aurat March is considered as a western agenda, run by elite class women of Pakistan. Challengers of the march have the claim that Aurat March is a western scheme to damage the cultural, social and religious values of Pakistani society which is based on the core values of Islam. The criticism gets more hype through media sensitization of the March. In Pakistan, the common perception about feminist movements is that, these movements are western influenced activities led by elite-class women. Patriarchal structure is based on oppressing one gender to formulate the authority and establishment of the other gender. In short, the organizers and supporters of Aurat March believe that women in Pakistan are discriminated at homes, in public and at state level for which movements like Aurat March is necessary to alter the system favorable and secure for women in Pakistan. Women are not identified as an independent entity but oppressed in terms of body rights to economic rights.

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