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**AURAT MARCH: CLASH OF SOCIAL AND
RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVES ON WOMEN'S
ISSUES**

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ABSTRACT

The Aurat March, an annual event in Pakistan, has become a significant platform for advocating women's rights, gender equality, and social justice. This movement, which began in 2018, highlights key issues such as gender-based violence, workplace harassment, and bodily autonomy. However, it also faces significant opposition from conservative and religious factions, who argue that its slogans and demands contradict Islamic teachings and traditional family values. This article explores the complex intersection between social advocacy for women's rights and the resistance rooted in religious and cultural values in Pakistan. The study examines both supportive and critical perspectives on the Aurat March, shedding light on the points of convergence, such as shared concerns about women's safety and education, as well as fundamental differences in views on autonomy and morality. The role of media in shaping public opinion, either exacerbating or bridging this divide, is also explored. Furthermore, the article discusses the impact of this conflict on public opinion, legislative reforms, and the future of activism in Pakistan. It concludes with recommendations for bridging the divide between social and religious perspectives, including fostering dialogue, promoting women's rights within a culturally sensitive framework, and leveraging education to reduce polarization. This paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities in advancing women's rights in Pakistan while navigating its socio-religious complexities.

Keywords: *Aurat March, women's rights, gender equality, Pakistan, social advocacy, religious perspectives, autonomy, cultural values, media influence, polarization, activism, legislative reforms.*

Introduction

"The measure of any society is how it treats its women." This quote reveals the stark social injustices that women have to bear in Pakistan which is characterized by male dominated society and structural oppression. The Aurat March which began in 2018 is designed to deal with such injustices by addressing concerns of women focusing on violence against women, issues of pay disparity, reproductive issues, and

discrimination. As mentioned in the Global Gender Gap Report 2023 published by the World Economic Forum, among 146 nations Pakistan stands at 142 ranking which reinforces the need for campaigns like the Aurat March (WEF, 2023). It is a crusade not just a banner, it calls the society to embrace its prejudices and rip them at the level of policies. They all gather under one roof and raise their voices in support of equality freedom and justice. And this amount of unity and oneness does not come easily, there are countless critics who firmly believe that the march more effectively violates time honored traditions hallowed by religion and culture and that takes the march a few notches to become one of the most controversial events in the nation.

The Aurat March was largely based on feminist movements, but the meaning of the Aurat March goes beyond one women's movement. It is the shared plight of the women of Pakistan that yearn for security, honor and control over their lives at work and home. It is also one of the most contentious issues Mera Jism Meri Marzi (My Body, My Choice) which calls for independence of the body. It is said to be an abuse and harassments rejecting declaration, but some sees it as a danger to the Islamic and cultural civilization values. (Ali & Hashmi, 2021). This controversy is a representation of the other social issues the march seeks to address, like the issue of modernity and tradition. However, the march has not only brought important issues to the public attention, it has also sparked enormous anger, where critics blame the event organizers of, espousing Western values and putting into peril the moral compass of Pakistan. This sort of pushback is indicative of the thin line that has to be walked when fighting for rights in cultures whose major influences are religion and culture.

The Aurat March is best understood as a sphere for competing sub-ideologies, one of which is of women's empowerment while the other is of cultural values. This article specifically tackles the intricacies of this dichotomy considering that the movement has raised women's consciousness, but at the same time exposed the deeply inter-woven ills of society. This paper aims towards understanding this phenomenon with reference to social and religious context of Pakistan in which the Aurat March takes place. The march is an activity but not only, is it a symbol of the changing image of the country where advancement in the future is to embrace its roots. In the end, addressing these shortcomings is crucial in developing the means for conversations, healing, and tangible change.

Aurat March's Historical Background

The Aurat March in Pakistan started in the year 2018 in the city of Karachi as a way to counter the oppression of women in that country. Activism was spearheaded by the likes of Feminist groups such as the Women's Action Forum (WAF) which sought to provide an avenue for women's voices to be heard and to champion for their rights. The march seeks to address various issues including domestic violence, gender based violence and work place discrimination. It sought to learn from the existing international feminist movements including the "MeToo

campaign”, but adjust it to problems that Pakistan women face. It was their goal to foster an enabling environment that would benefit women in all spheres of life, especially those who belong to disadvantaged groups (Haq, 2020).

Nowadays, Aurat March includes strong themes and it is intriguing to note that *Mera Jism Meri Marzi* (My Body My Choice) is one of the themes of the march together with other themes such as *Mera Mukhtaar Diti Hai Nari* (Nari Gives Instructions) *Mandir Dhoondhe Ge Shadi Ke Baad* (Will Look for the Temple After Marriage) ‘Yes, I’m Sitting Properly’ and ‘Heat Your Own Food’. While these movements expose hypocrisy and misogyny, some critics believe that other moving quotes go against the cultural and religious beliefs, increasing the criticism of the strategy used for the movement. However, the impact of these slogans is primarily focused on women’s individual independence and freedom irrespective of the negative impact that the situation may have (Zafar & Khan, 2021).

The Aurat March began in Karachi only but now we can see its growing reach very quickly, expanding to cities such as Lahore, Islamabad, and Quetta. Ahqaaq awareness was raised along with advocacy to change laws that challenged the movement to overturn the status quo. The demand for enforcing restrictions against workplace harassment, violence at home, and safer environments has received approval and disapproval in equal measure. For example, many progressive societies regard it as a success while conservative groups still fight against the cause, calling it “westernized” and not befitting of a Pakistani culture. Ahsaans but still finding that the Aurat March continues to remain a global sign of defiance and inspiration for a population of millions on this globe, for women who want to have a more equal more just world (Yousaf, 2023).

Social Perspectives on Aurat March

Supportive Views

A speaker of the Aurat March sees it as significant movement towards gender equality while the feminists, human rights activists and other progressive people think that the march brings to surface very important issues such as issues of employment, domestic violence, and gender dominance that have been neglected for too long in the country. The movement raises the issues of women who are otherwise silumbered because of modern day tion norms and social evils. It is emphasized that the purpose of the march is not to disrespect cultural or religious beliefs but to demand the rule of law, security, and equitability towards women. Topics that include the wage gap, reproductive rights, and gender-based violence are themes which the Aurat March addresses in order to oppose those pillars that support women oppression and abuse (Khan & Sadiq, 2022).

The Aurat March is tremendously important to raising awareness towards the issue women from various classes and strata of society face. Within the rgementos of the march, there is a constant call to end workplace harassment and more vigorous application of laws against

domestic violence. It is also pointed out that it is necessary to improve the implementation of the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act of 2010 and the legislation on honour killings and acid throwing. Since the Aurat March tries to amplify the voices of women who have been victims of such issues, it also encourages more women to step forward for justice. Furthermore, its focus on self-ownership of one's body which is stress through the slogan "Mera Jism Meri Marzi" also paved ways for fruitful conversations about previously regarded sensitive topics such as marital rape and women's reproductive health (Ahmed, 2021).

Building the Aurat March's impact and support has been possible because of several progressive communities and organizations. For instance, the Women's Action Forum (WAF) and the Aurat Foundation not only help in mobilizing and funding the march but also provide legal and emotional help to the abuse victims. Apart from these, the organizations already mentioned coordinate with the human rights commissions in the pursuit for legislative and policy reforms that enhance the benefits of women. Likewise, students from universities, student union and cultural movement contribute a lot in sensitizing and mobilizing the younger people towards the advocacy for gender justice. And, the attention of the supporters at the March of Aurat has grown, with the help of social networks. Influencers and activists also use social networking sites, where they begin to disseminate reliable information instead of delusions. In Combination, these assist in forming the kind of society that acknowledges women. Thus, contributing enough to the cry for delivering a more just Pakistan (Shah & Niazi, 2023).

Critical Views

One of the strongest criticisms directed at Aurat March is that it promotes anti family principles which are against the culture and religious norms of Pakistan. It is claimed by the opponents that the slogans used during the march and the demands raised, target the customs and traditions of looking after the family in which women are the main caregivers and stay home. In the eyes of a good number of conservative women's images and ideas demanding self-determination such as Mera Jism Meri Marzi (My Body, My Choice) are clearly opposed to the basic moral standards of a family. According to critics, such tendencies promote antagonism towards parental authority and an outrage against marriage, thus barbarizing the relations in the family (Ali, 2021). In many instances, traditionalists and religious authorities invoke Islam against women's activism contending that women's rights should be pursued in Islam rather than aggressively campaigning for them.

The Aurat March is often condemned for promoting feminism in Pakistan, alongside the perception that it is Western-based. Critics often state that the western form of feminism is often replicated in the Aurat March while ignoring Pakistani feminism. For instance, the agitations of such critics furthers the notion that Pakistanis are resisting gender autonomy and woman's rights, and undermines the notion that these

ideas are part of the larger Islamic culture. This narrative is based on the logic that the Aurat March further excludes rural and lower class women by mobilizing urban women and viewing them as 'elites'. Such allegations create rifts in society and makes the objectives of the march even more difficult to achieve. The supporters of this view believe local issues such as women's rights to education and healthcare are far more pressing than any so-called 'Western based' feminism (Malik & Hussain, 2022).

The social media storm indeed pushed further the anxiety and the opposition to the aurat march. For example, Twitter feeds are full of these cuts which defame the participants of the March by distorting interpretation of the slogans. A good example is the controversy over what might be seen as nakedness in the female form, where pictures of extensively edited posters were disseminated to undermine the initiative and the people involved in it with the aid of social media. Such drives have made it possible for female militants to get at the opponent politicians and supporters making the whole situation volatile. Social media is however a different story as trolls and conservative groups in conjunction with fellows march on the Middle East heritage antagonism, ignoring the core problems the march advocates. This backlash not only demonizes the participants but also demoralises the remaining to join or support the cause (Yousaf & Zafar, 2023). Nevertheless, the aurat march has been able to endure through the persistence and the hard work of its supporters despite the difficulties.

Religious Views on Aurat March

The clerical and traditionalist stance towards the Aurat March often centers on the perception that its slogans and themes contradict Islamic teachings. So, to those Muslim leaders and the conservatively inclined, the bodily autonomy advocated by issues such as *Mera Jism Meri Marzi* (My Body, My Choice), directly opposes Islam, especially regarding modesty and family structure. They argue that such discourse erodes moral principles and embows Western ideologies which bet to the core of the Islam faith (Raza & Usman, 2022). For traditionalists, supporting women liberation is only beneficial provided it does not cross the line of religion for instance gender equality within marriage. They also agree on the need to conduct measures which protect women against violence and harassment, but they do not support the practice of the march, saying that it promotes hatred and division among the people. This has sparked numerous demonstrations against the Aurat March, with some religious leaders rejecting the March altogether, contending that it has negative impacts on people's harmonious social life and Islamic customs.

On the contrary, the more moderate Islamic scholars argue that Islam is its very essence a religion that promotes gender equality and equity for women folk. Even some of the demands that the Aurat March made are within the parameters of Islam such as provision of safety, dignity and equal chances for women. For instance, Dr. Khalid Zaheer maintains that Islam forbids wife beatings, Islam prohibits child marriages, and Islam prohibits a woman being sexually harassed at work places – all

issues which the Aurat March aims to address (Zaheer, 2023). In addition, they also mention Muslim women's contribution with examples from the past, such as Asma bint Umayy (RA) a businesswoman, Hazrat Khadijah (RA) a businesswoman, and Hazrat Aisha (RA) a scholar and a leader. These persons provide evidence in favor of the fact that Islam has always preserved women's voice and leadership. There are also progressive views within Islam on how to positively relate to the Aurat March in order to understand the quest for justice and equality rather than oppose it.

There are ample situations in Islamic history that affirmatively talk of Islam as a religion that granted many rights to its female population. The Quran itself states that men and women are equal and encourages social and marital justice as evidenced in the Quran: "Men and women need to be kind to each other" (Quran 4:19). Also, during the age of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), women were involved in all aspects of life including economics, education, and politics, which is in support of gender empowerment in Islam. Sumayyah bint Khayyat who is said to be the first Muslim woman martyr represents strength and faith, knowing that the Prophet (PBUH) constantly pushed for women's education exemplifies that knowledge is for everyone (Bukhari, 9:89:102). Feminist marches are focused on certain goals but a more constructive approach could include Islam in the focus, this way the gaps that exist between traditionalists and feminists would be closed, focusing on the welfare of women in Pakistan.

Points of Convergence and Divergence

Aurat March, as a feminist movement, shows interesting verticals and gaps amongst secular feminists and religious women's rights advocates. Seemingly, one such similarity perspective is to ensure that women do not suffer abuse and rape. Whether the feminist is social or religious, care or protection of woman's body and mind emphasize. In fact, both the sides have also supported the Harassment of Women at the Workplace Bill of 2010 and such other policy measures as important levers for promotion of women's security. In addition, commonality in a feeling is also noted on the want for the women to be educated and in particular in areas where education is not qualitative. Within the Muslim society there has been a movement for women to be educated but within the framework of Islam where the guidelines set by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), who has much wisdom in utilizing the power of word advocating education for women and men. Certainly, secular feminists and Muslim women rights advocates have the same view that every young girl must have an opportunity to attend school and acquire skills which her brothers have.

These common goals reinforce mutual responsibilities especially since both schools of thought appreciate education and protection from violence as basic needs for women empowerment (Siddiqui & Anwar, 2022).

Despite the foregoing, there exist underlying differences in the perspectives of autonomy and moral agency. As an example, social

activists hold that a woman has the right to make decisions pertaining to her body, her work, her life as an individual. This argument is reflected in the slogan, *Mera Jism Meri Marzi* (My Body, My Choice), which has been striving to advocate for women mobility with a pro-choice stand. Conversely, religious advocates are of the belief that there exists freedom, but that is freedom to be exercised only within certain moral and religious values. They also claim that the freedom being fought for by social activists in some cases contradicts the Islamic notions of hijab, marriage, and the roles of a family. The clash becomes sharper when spousal rights, divorce, and inheritance issues come up as social activists call for change on these issues while religious groups oppose change in their interpretation of these aspects because in their view, they are Islamic teachings (Yusuf & Khan, 2023).

It must be stated that media is a great deciding factor whether they aggravate or reduce the division which is both social and religious on the Aurat March for example social media this day has given the activists the chance to seek attention, be heard on issues that matter to them and try to alter distorted social views. But the same also has provided space for false narratives as anti-march campaigns use these tools to paint negative images of the participants and their ideas. Such viral videos, fake news and vicious comments have caused the movement more often than not to lose focus on the aim it had which makes the argument rather controversial. Nonetheless, there is a better way in which the security of communication channels can be leveraged to serve the aim as they try to use moderation in the extremity of the story by reporting both sides. Rather than escalating the situation between the two sides of the debate they are seen as a part that can assist in bringing them together. Whereas, on other instances, it has detrimental effects due to media bias, sensationalism or only selective focusing the issue (Khan & Iqbal, 2023)

The Effect of the Conflict on Society

The ongoing clash between the social advocates and the religious groups concerning the Aurat March has significantly changed the narrative around women in Pakistan. On the one hand, the Aurat March has empowered women suffering domestic violence, harassment and discrimination and helped them to speak out against such oppression. It has also sparked public discourse particularly in the cities where women's rights; autonomy and social justice discourses are increasingly becoming fashionable. However, conservative groups have reacted strongly and this has resulted in a polarized perception of the movement, with some supporters seeing it as an essential step toward gender equity and others claiming it threatens the Islamic cultural fabric of Pakistan. This in turn has resulted in a state where women's rights discourses are politicized with the public's opinion being divided between liberalism and conservatism. As a consequence, the debates and conversations on gender equality are increasingly shaped by the conflict between these two views, complicating the journey towards better collective transformation of society (Shah & Mehmood, 2022).

Social and religious viewpoints conflict in quite a dramatic way in the Pakistan setting, thereby affecting legislation and policy formulation concerning women's rights. On the one hand, the Aurat March has contributed to the advancement of reforms in laws relating to the existing provisions of harassment and domestic violence by increasing the pressure on activists to implement the existing provisions and create new ones. For example, the Domestic Violence Prevention and Protection Bill, 2021, was aimed at legalising the position of women who are victims of domestic violence. The Bill was introduced as a result of the increased visibility and demand for protection of women's rights, which to some extent, was catalyzed by the Aurat March. On the other hand, the resistance to some of the asks for example, issues on reproductive rights and issues on the right of the body have inhibited the development of policies and programs that would have likely fostered the aims and objectives of the movement, such as those. The religious and conservative political elements continue to fight against changes that go against what they view as family values or those that contradict the teachings of Islam. In the end, the political climate is still very polarized, with backlash to progressive demands for women's rights being able to outrank some achieved milestones in women's rights (Niazi & Hassan, 2023).

The split between sociocultural and religious divisions has ramifications for how activism would occur in Pakistan in the future. While it would be said that the space for engaging and negotiating common positions is reduced, the activists' ability to mobilize and coalesce with others is relatively constrained. While on the other side, the Feminist movements and Aurat Marches seek to address gender based violence amongst other things to economic oppression. But the mobilization efforts by conservative elements have led many women to unfortunate harassment and threats especially on social platforms that may discourage them as well as the overall public backing against this polarisation, some parts of the activist community might become more insular and focus on moderate change, while others push for aggressive reform for societal transformation. Thus the active engagement might come undone as that is the ability to co-build such middle ground in Pakistan without giving up, of course the basic tenets of feminism and justice (Khan & Farooq, 2023).

Strategies for Overcoming the Differences

An important recommendation for overcoming the differences between Hugh Muir, the religious leaders and now the activists, and the marchers is to encourage interaction that is respectful and constructive. Both social advocates for women's rights and members of religious groups often feel their beliefs and views are neglected or not comprehended, thus increasing tensions. A more productive model would be to provide fora for conversations in which religious authorities, feminists and others are able to identify common goals which Islam and women's rights seek to achieve. For instance, progressive religious scholars can be useful in rectifying various perceptions and translating issues of Islam and women

justice in ways that appeal to both the social and religious advocates. Likewise, activists can provide real life experiences of how their approaches, women's rights movements for example, are consistent with values that religion and society advocate for, that is, fairness, justice and dignity among others. This kind of engagement can foster understanding, lessen suspicion, and facilitate reinforcing strategies for promoting women's rights in relation to the surrounding environment (Shah & Khan, 2022).

Another recommendation is that, while promoting women's rights in Pakistan, due consideration should be paid to the cultural and religious sensitivities in the society. Instead of viewing women's empowerment as something imposed by the external world or the West, it needs to be viewed through the lenses of the traditions and beliefs of the people of that country especially Islam. This would need first and foremost a dialogue and a joint seeking of agenda between feminists, Muslim clerics, and state authorities in order to devise one that appeals to most people in Pakistan. For instance, discussions on gender imbalance should raise Islamic perspectives of women in leadership positions and highlight many such 'claims' including that of Hazrat Khadijah (RA) and Hazrat Aisha (RA) who are said to have had great influence on Islamic religion and society. Also, they should appreciate the internal diversity that exists among the Pakistani people and be sensitive not to side line those that are poor and women who live in the rural areas, rather help them raise their concerns. This culturally sensitive strategy should reduce the backlash from conservative groups and gain wider acceptance of gender equality politics (Zaheer & Malik, 2023).

Education is a key factor in preventing polarization and achieving long-term changes regarding gender equity in Pakistan. Educational institutions, ranging from primary school to university, have the capacity to impact one's perception of women's rights, gender roles and diversity. If incorporated into the curricula, gender studies can sensitize students at younger ages about the need for equality which will result in more respectful, inclusive attitudes. Also, gender modules ought to be included in teacher training programs so that teachers will be able to foster a safe and inclusive atmosphere for both males and females. The public awareness campaigns that are executed by the media can also work in educating the people on how women should be respected and the role that they play in society. In the long run, such initiatives will work towards de-escalating the tension that exists between the social and religious divides by focusing on the principles of respect, justice and equality and the challenges of feminism and women's rights (Niazi & Rehman, 2023).

Conclusion

The Aurat March holds great significance in Pakistan where deep-seated societal, cultural and religious views influence the public's opinion and policy making regarding women's rights. As discussed earlier, The Aurat March has turned out to be a voice of the women who were oppressed and sidelined for centuries. Women around the world have been on the

front lines for the issues like violence against women, gendered pay gap, workplace harassment and discrimination, abortion as well as reproductive rights, during which the movement has been able to ignite crucial discussions regarding changes needed in the perception of women in society. Under that campaign, women are not only advocating for themselves but also challenging the status quo that would otherwise remain intact. Though, as expected, the movement does get considerable push back from conservative and religious groups which claim that the demands being put forth undermine the family unit and the principles of Islam. This divide further reflects on the daunting task of being a women's rights activist in an environment that is skewed with culture and religion. Even with all the obstacles, the interaction/confrontation of the social campaigners with the religious groups strikes a point of hope and despair at the same time regarding the practical implementation of women's empowerment in Pakistan. On one hand, there are some commonalities around which both the groups agree to such as the need to protect women from domestic violence or the need to improve literacy rates amongst girls.

Such common issues create a background around which constructive dialogue might be built. Nonetheless, some fundamental differences with regard to autonomy and morality have remained sources of contention, particularly in relation to reproductive health, gender issues, and personal liberties. The role of media in either creating or narrowing this chasm is always of great importance, because they can nurture false narratives, and help in resolving conflicts, depending on how the issues are framed.

Bridging the gap can be accomplished through a lively dialogue after engaging religious leaders, activists, and the public. This dialogue should start by identifying areas of commonality while paying regard to Pakistan's culture and religion. Targeting more Islamic oriented view on women's rights would mean more attractiveness of the movement of Islamic part of society that is unlike. Culturally sensitive discourse enables future generations of Pakistanis to adopt more favorable attitudes towards concepts such as gender equality and women's rights. Gender studies and promotion of sensitivity to gender issues the teachers should promote at all educational levels could contribute to reduction of polarization in gender issues as well as in society as a whole. Like all activism, the Aurat March is a mass movement focused not only on the aspirations of women, but encompasses a range of issues that seek justice, transformation of society and equality. The path is tricky ahead but the people working for change have an incredible amount of endurance and the prospect of facing eye-to-eye discussions gives hope that women's issues will someday find acceptance in the social and religious context of Pakistan. The aims of the movement will only be achieved through the continued work of bridging gaps and deepening inclusion. Society will benefit immeasurably from these ideals and of which women have worked tirelessly to achieve.

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