

AURAT MARCH: RELIGION AND FEMINISM IN PAKISTAN

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Submitted to
Central European University
Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts (MA) in Sociology

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Budapest, Hungary

2020

Abstract

Feminism has played a pivotal role in the transformation of modern societies. Feminist movements globally have altered traditional patriarchal mentalities and helped women negotiate for their social and political space in a male-dominated world. In simple words, what have feminist movements striven for, among other things? Equality. However, beginning from a historically specific (western) and ethnocentric understanding, feminist theories have evolved to appreciate nuances brought about by culture and history across geographical contexts. Nevertheless, despite the differences in culture, outlook, practices and rhetoric of different feminist movements, the core ideal of feminism, that of gender equality, remains at the epicenter across the world. Broadly speaking, despite the immense differences in different feminisms, and critiques of western feminism for being ethnocentric and ignorant of realities of non-western women, feminism has striven for agency, freedom and gender equality. Freedom and gender equality have broadly agreed upon definitions, but the word agency here means an individual's potential to act, but only under a given set of cultural, social, political and religious boundaries. This concept will be critically elaborated upon, and discussed in extensive detail later. Keeping in mind the Marxist and postcolonial critiques of the so-called universalizing western feminism, this thesis is an appreciation of the universal value of feminist ideals and their expression through an insight into a postcolonial feminist movement 'Aurat (women) March' within a semi-theocratic Islamic republic, Pakistan. In addition to this argument, this thesis also argues for the creation of more theoretical space to understand feminism in a religious and socially conservative society since its practices, demands and outlook might be different from the western approach, but its aspirations are equally revolutionary and transformative. Eventually, this movement's practices and ideas, are a source of rich theoretical insights. This research gathered data through online semi-structured

qualitative interviews with the duration of 25-30 minutes each. Some of the interviews were bilingual (English and Urdu) that were later transcribed into English. The interviewees talked about their affiliations with the march and how they became a part of the march, how it helped them to claim their basic rights, to express them themselves in a male dominated space.

Keywords: *Feminism, agency, women, religion, state, Islamic feminism, liberal feminism, Aurat March*

Acknowledgements

Coming from a background in Psychology, with very limited knowledge of sociological theory and practices, I have evolved as a student and as a person in the past 9 months. These past months have been an amazing journey with CEU in terms of personal and professional growth. I am grateful to the department of Sociology for enabling me gain Sociological and Anthropological knowledge and expertise.

In addition to that I thank my primary supervisor Dr. Vlad Naumescu for his insightful support in thesis writing and analysis. Moreover, I express my gratitude to my secondary reader Dr. Jean-Louis Fabiani for his intellectual intervention and kind support. Lastly I would like to thank my professors back home and my family for supporting me throughout my thesis journey.

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Introduction

This thesis is a comprehensive analysis of a contemporary feminist movement in the Islamic republic of Pakistan. It explores the unique dynamics created by the interaction of a women rights movement, and the politics of conservatism within the hybrid political system of Pakistan, one of the so-called Islamic republics of today. This project aims to create and elaborate on certain nuances in traditionally defined concepts of feminism, agency, religion and the state. It tries to understand how one movement produces unique arguments, challenges established norms within academia and the public sphere of a semi-democratic, partly modern – partly conservative (though these terms might not necessarily be opposites) developing country. The term and concept of agency, to be discussed in detail later on, is of immense important for this project. Agency, a classical term in the disciplines of gender studies and sociology, traditionally described as the potential to act or the capacity to do so, in a given social environment. This thesis, like most contemporary work in the social sciences, acknowledges the notion that agency does not exist in an absolute, unchanging form, it evolves and its extent differs according to situations and environments. An individual's actions depend a lot on the social environment they find themselves in, thereby, regulating their agency. This thesis, in terms of women's agency, discusses the nuance brought about by religious regulation and how the counter actions to such regulations look like. In simple words, if agency is the potential to act, and that potential, let's say, is restricted by religion, or any other thought system, here are certain ways of maximizing one's potential, or agency, that might not appear to be such on the first, superficial glance.

The phrase ‘western feminism’ or the western understanding of feminism is distinct from other feminisms, not merely in its ideals, but also in its appearance, terminology, ethnocentricity and approach towards the rest of the world. Feminism, just like many other western ideals, have been criticized by postcolonial theorists for being too ethnocentric, and thereby neglecting the unique issues of third-world women and other marginalized groups. However, the ideal of feminism, as expressed by major proponents of feminism throughout the past decades, has some features in common including gender equality, freedom of women from exploitation and patriarchy, an end to hatred towards women and a rejection of this belief that women are inherently inferior to men, can’t be overlooked. For instance, piety movements in Egypt and more recently, Aurat March (women’s march), in Pakistan are examples of feminist movements that differ from traditional western feminist movements, especially in their rhetoric, outlook and practices. However, they argue for the emancipation of women in their respective societies, borrowing a lot from ideals that emerged in the western world.

This thesis provides an account of a movement originating in Pakistan - a post-colonial state, an Islamic republic and a developing economy. This thesis will try to analyze the impact such a movement has on the corpus of feminism and feminist movements globally, and its influence on the social and political fabric of Pakistani society. Due to its indigenous origins and the broad diversity of social groups involved, this movement has had a strong impact and has ignited serious debates on identity, religion, women’s role and patriarchy. This movement received tremendous resistance on accounts of promoting a ‘Western agenda’ or being ‘secular’ despite the fact that it represents women from different socio-economic and religious backgrounds asking for an end to social oppression and politico-economic marginalization of women. Yet these people have been marching together on the streets every year since 2018 in the major cities of Pakistan.

Therefore, I will argue that a liberation march against oppression doesn't confine a movement to a specific understanding of feminism, neither does it promote a 'prowestern' or 'unIslamic agenda'. This feminist movement is contextualized within a specific frame of a historically and culturally shared ethos by participants of the movement living under an Islamic Republic.

This research explores the Aurat March as an emerging feminist movement in the Islamic republic of Pakistan. It is a movement that heads country-wide protests, mostly organized by women in which women from major cities including Islamabad, Karachi, Lahore and Hyderabad come out on streets and protest together for their rights in domestic space, workplace and in the broader framework of power relations. Their protest is also an initiative for marginalized communities of transgenders, religious and ethnic minorities. Aurat is an Urdu word which denotes for "a woman". Therefore, aurat march can be interpreted as "women's march". Though it is titled as "aurat march" but a number of men also take part in it as allies alongside women.

The notions of agency from the Aurat March organizers and participants were analyzed within the framework of the political and religious fabric of Pakistan. Since the country was created based on the historical narrative of religious distinctiveness of the largest minority, Muslims, from the majority, Hindus, in India. After its creation, the country witnessed a politico religious turmoil with the amalgamation of religion with state. Since the partition of India, Pakistan has been trying to find its identity, and a functional ideological stance that provides a stable political system, and hasn't been successful in doing so, primarily, because a major reason for the creation of the country was to allow the Muslims of the subcontinent to practice Islam freely. Therefore, Islam has been a central component of the Pakistani identity. Starting from the cold war period when the trained guerilla fighters (Jihadists - *mujahedeen*) were sent to Afghanistan to fight against the Soviet Union by Zia-Ul- Haq's Islamization drive. At the same Iranian revolution spurred the seeds of

Sunni¹ sentiments in Pakistan. All of this led General Zia to introduce ultra- orthodox laws in Pakistan with Sunni interpretations of Islam. As the article 2 in the multi layered 1973 constitution Pakistan that was formulated after Zia came to power declares Islam as the official religion of the state. Additionally, another obligation is the accordance of laws with the injunctions of Quran and Sunnah (teachings of the Prophet Muhammad). (Feffer & Mushtaq, 2007) This leads the state to devise laws that are in accordance with Muslim theology, delimiting the democratic or secular laws that don't necessarily align with the interpretation of the religious texts. The trend of militancy continued even after the demise of Zia in 1988. Even the semi civilian rule of Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto could do little to end this tide of Sunni military rule.

In contemporary Pakistan, a number of feminists try to look at feminism from the Islamic lens with the explanation that since Islamic is the reality under which Pakistani women live, hence this cannot be ignored in any feminist analysis. On the other hand, some feminists like Asma Barlas try to unread the patriarchal interpretation of the Quran. Moreover, some feminists like Riffat Hassan tend to give other theological interpretations of feminism that reconcile with Islam and the modern human rights discourse. Additionally, the psychotherapist feminist Durre Ahmad critiques the positivist thinkers on denigrating religion based on the reason that religion is more deeply connected to the feminine and the oppressed as compared to the masculine ideals of value-neutrality. On the other hand, the modern feminists argue for the liberation of women from the patriarchal traditions of the society. (Saigol, 2016)

This research explores how this movement was a turning point in the history of women in the country since it brought about one major development. This development is the

¹ Sunni is a religious sect in Islam.

acknowledgment that the ideological foundation of women's fair and equal treatment is not as important as the treatment itself. This movement seems to argue that women deserved to be liberated out of oppression, to be treated equally, while the reasons for that treatment didn't really make a difference. This is because it brought people of different class backgrounds, ethnicities, demographic groups and religio-political leanings together for women rights. Moreover, an analysis of the placards they were holding clearly demonstrates logical and legitimate demands rather than ideological or political slogans. As I think agency plays a huge role and provides a great lens to look at the lives of women and their interaction with the social world. Agency acts as a source to highlight the individual action taken by them amidst the structural dichotomy of the society.

Most of the women participants and organizers of the Aurat March were brought up in the non-liberal climate of Pakistan. As their parents were the youth of Islamization era and had ingrained the state propagated Islamic values of that time period. Decutsche Welle (DW), a German media organization published an article by Shamil Shams about Islamization and Pakistan that quoted a Karachi based journalist, Majid Siddiqui's interview; Majid recounted that "although Zia-Ul-Haq is dead, his pernicious ideology is very much alive in Pakistan" (Shams, 2016). The term pernicious ideology here entails for the use of religion as a tool by Haq to strengthen his power, and the Pakistan we witness today is a product of Haq's policies and it is becoming tremendously difficult to get rid of this ideology. This leads to think of the dynamics of a feminist project in a post Islamization state. In this research I found it quite interesting to explore the different concepts and understandings of agency that played a pivotal role in the lives of the participants of the movement. Agency, for some, meant being provided the chance to have an education, for others, it meant the capacity to make everyday decisions. For some, it was more

about symbolic acceptance as individuals, for others, it was about major decisions including education, marriage, employment and so forth. The most interesting case is that of the protestors coming from a conservative background. Their arguments included basic acceptance of them as being individual human beings, having a proper decision-making faculty of their own, and for them, it was important to be acknowledged as such. However, their appearance, their language and usage of terms clearly represented an attachment and devotion to religion. It seemed as if the question of religion or religious clerics being the primary cause of discrimination never occurred to them. Nevertheless, for them, the discrimination comes from more non-religious present-day cultural aspect of Pakistani society.

Aurat March presents a combination of different kinds of feminist ideas under one umbrella i.e. equality. It consisted of intersectional feminists that claim rights for all segments of society including gender, class etc. On the other hand, ‘anarcha’ include leftist feminists claiming for an end to patriarchy, and also some of the Islamic feminists who support this movement.

Before moving forward, a note on methodology is essential here. The methodology used was qualitative. It included in depth structured and semi structured interviews of the organizers and consistent participants of the movement. The respondents mostly included women, but one male participant was also interviewed for purposes of gender diversity. Additionally, one transgender was also on the list to be interviewed but they were busy so time couldn’t be coordinated. The data generated involves people from different gender, class, socio-economic and religious backgrounds.

The unit of analysis are the organizers and the participants of Aurat March. They belonged to different cities of Pakistan namely Islamabad, Lahore, Karachi, Multan, Dera Ghazi Khan. Therefore, they belong to a mix of urban and rural areas of the country. The duration of the

interviews on average was 30-40 minutes long, as they were semi-structured. This enabled me to have in-depth interviews of the respondents as they narrated their journey of Aurat march.

Demographics of the respondents

Serial number	Name	Age	Educational Background	Social Background	Gender spectrum
1.	Ifrah Hassan	25	MA Public Policy	urban	Female
2.	Menahil Shahid	21	Junior Year Political Science	urban	Queer
3.	Nayab Jan	32	Journalism	Urban	Female
4.	Aimen Bucha	30	Gender studies, Human rights activist	Urban	Female
5.	Mohsin Abbas	25	MA, Agriculture	Rural	Male
6.	Ghania Khan	22	Political Science, senior year	rural	Non-binary
7.	Alina Anjum	24	Sociology	Urban	Female
8.	Ayesha	23	Political Science	Semi Urban	Female
9.	Marvi Sirmed	45	Human rights activist	Urban	Female

1.1 Socio-political history of Pakistan

India was partitioned in 1947. The primary purpose of the creation of the state was that the citizens are able to practice their religion without any barriers according to the Quran and Sunnah. Therefore, religion became a major component of the Pakistani national identity. This newly formed association of national identity with religious morality brought serious consequences for the minorities, including women, as the basic parameters to live as a Pakistani citizen were enforced by the state.

Since its partition, Pakistan's history has been fueled by conflict and intrigue. Ian Talbot in his book *"Pakistan: A new history"* (Talbot, 2017) argues that Pakistan has undergone minute structural and fundamental changes since its inception. Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, the charismatic socialist Prime Minister during the 1970s, had a positive impact on inclusion and democracy but he couldn't provide a resolution vis-à-vis the role of Islam in the public sphere, since he was busy solidifying his rule over a strong military and conservative political forces. Therefore, he was unable to abolish state centered tensions and feudalism, the impact of those concessions is seen today in the form of rising attacks on minorities and the rise of sectarian violence across the country (Kabraji, 2013).

Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto laid the seeds for the next leader General Zia-Ul-Haq to fasten the process of state-sponsored Islamization in the country. This is because he enacted some religious laws as he was being targeted by the religious elite for being too secular. Talbot argues that though there was no homogenous Islam in the country, this era still marked the spike in the purposely contrast of expressions of faith in between Deobandi Islam and Sufi Islam and it reinforced the

notion of the association of Islam with national identity. Afterwards, regimes kept trying to strike this balance between Islam (religious clerics) and democracy (keeping the military at bay).

The aforementioned unpredictable state of Pakistani politics had serious consequences on minorities and women. During Zia's dictatorship, Islamization gained a stronghold in Pakistani politics as he forged an alliance with the conservative groups of the country to legitimize his rule and balance out the appeal for the socialist Bhutto's political party (Pakistan People's Party, PPP). Zia appeased the traditionalists by establishing Pakistan as an Islamic republic.

Protests of Aurat March

1.2 Literature Review

This chapter aims to explore the theoretical background for the research on Aurat March. It includes the feminist literature by feminist scholars in addition to that it discusses the contemporary threads of feminism in socio-political landscape of Pakistan. Moreover, it also discusses the role of the state regarding the feminist projects while juxtaposing country's political dynamics with the other Muslim societies across the globe,

“One is not born, but rather becomes a woman”

Simone de Beauvoir

In her book *The Second Sex*, De Beauvoir presents the idea of woman as “other”, that woman is everything man is not. She discussed how society shapes women's attitudes towards her body and bodily functions and how she is treated or defined as relative to men (Joseph, 2008). Therefore, her text is relevant to my field of study because in Pakistan women have always been treated as second citizens and “otherized”.

The feminist movements and women's right consciousness in Pakistan has been a result of the national and international reshaping of power which includes colonialism, nationalism, democracy, dictatorship and the global war of terror. (Saigol, 2016)

But before digging deeper into the context of feminism, defining feminism is important. It is difficult to give one overarching definition of any women's movement or feminism due to existence of a wide range of concepts, definitions and ideas of both feminist and women rights movements. (Saigol, 2016) Feminism has emerged in different forms in different times or simultaneously. It includes liberal feminism which is the most accepted and participated form of

feminism and others including postcolonial, Marxist feminism. Liberal feminism argues for equal rights of women within a nation-state. On the other hand, Marxist feminists call for a change in the relations of production and private property and there is a challenge to the existing wage gap, duration of maternity leaves etc. While radical feminists emphasize on patriarchy as the main tool of oppression not only in the political but in the sphere of family as well and demands for the radical reordering of a society.

Despite a wide range of types of feminism, all feminist movements aspire to achieve some common ideals. Similarly, Aurat March clearly tries to put an end to oppression against women. bell hooks beautifully tries to explain the concept of feminism in her work “feminism is for everybody”. As apparent from the title of the book, she is of the view that feminism as a movement, was not originated with the notion to fight against patriarchy but it is better to define feminism as a struggle against sexism and oppression. She differentiate between two kind of feminists on a broader perspective, first ones were the “reformists”, emphasizing on gender equality and the others were the “revolutionists”, who emphasized not only on altering the system but transforming the whole white supremacist capitalist structure where patriarchy and sexism is institutionalized. (hooks, 2000)

Furthermore, hooks talks about the politics of the feminist movement. She explains the role of state mass media in being dismissive of feminism to discourage the masses. Such propaganda was based on white women without any class struggles trying to claim equal wages and space in the workforce from men. But the original revolutionary feminist discourse was never available to the local masses, it was only for the literate privileged people due to which a higher percentage of women were unaware of the actual cause of feminism. This produced biased views against feminism among the masses that feminism is anti- male and the struggle is to get all what men had

or have (Hooks, 2000). Hooks' critique of the mass media in manufacturing prejudice against feminism applies to the case of Aurat March as well. Mainstream media outlets and conservative groups built upon the decades old ideas of foreign, specifically western, cultural invasion and destruction of the social fabric of Pakistani society. This rhetoric of western ideals creating ruptures in the Pakistani family system has been constantly deployed to discredit Aurat March and its demands.

Moreover, Judith Butler in her essay, *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*, while discussing gender identity argues that “gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts”.(Butler, 1988). This discussion of Butler on gender helps us gaze through the construction of gender in Pakistan over a period of time and how women have to what Butler calls *perform* the role of being pious to gain recognition in the society. This angle of performativity will be later explored by the interviews with the respondents.

Afia.S. Zia, a Pakistani feminist academic, also discusses the coexistence of Islamic feminism and liberal feminism in Muslim societies. She pointed out the challenges that women have faced since 9/11 to exercise their rights in Pakistan. The “war on terror” initiated by George W. Bush as a result of Islamist extremism had serious impacts on rights and status of women in Pakistan (Ahmad, 2018). A culture was developed as a counter to the narrative of Islamophobia, eventually laying seeds of an Islamic identity that is more evident in the practices of Muslims. This also promoted the culture of veiling and abaya (full body covering) to show that Muslim women are pious unlike Western women who have lost sense of morality.

Zia, has also reviewed the work of Arab, Iranian and Pakistani feminists such as Riffat Hassan by talking about Islamic alternatives to western modernity as they have a greater chance to be internalized by Muslim men and women. Riffat Hassan worked for the rights of women not merely in Pakistan but internationally as well. But little was achieved by the women in Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia or Malaysia. Instead an altered Islamic feminism was established under the headship of Farhat Hashmi. This approach prohibited women from entering public spaces and distinguished itself from Western feminism backed by the notion that Western secularism challenges women's piety and purity of family life. (Ahmad, 2018). This makes one think about Spivak's (1988) argument in her work "can the subaltern speak?", mentions that women in the traditional or non-secular Hinduism, did not have the privilege to the speak for themselves or to secure their agency while perpetually resurrecting their roles which in turn construct men's gendered domination. In the similar way these women belonging to the Islamic feminism resurrected to the traditional role of not entering the public spaces and keeping themselves to the private sphere and it turn this reinforced their gendered identity and submission.

Sadaf Ahmed (2009) has worked on Islamic feminism in detail and highlighted how urban Pakistani women are increasingly following this complex variant of 'Islamic feminism'. Sadaf Ahmed's analysis highlights the reasons for the success of this movement and its persuasive techniques in detail. However, it misses out on one important angle i.e. how Farhat Hashmi, the founder of the Al-Huda movement, has successfully penetrated the male-dominated arena of the production of religious knowledge and is currently shaping the worldview of urban education, middle and upper-middle class women.

Dr. Farzana Bari (2000), who is a Pakistani feminist and a human rights activist, adds in her article "women in Pakistan", that there is a significant role played by feudal, tribal and capitalist

social forms in impacting women's lives (Bari, 2000). As these social forms impose the patriarchal values on women hence, not providing them with their rights to decide and to speak for themselves. Moreover, women's recognition is that of an instrumental nature as compared to men, as a subaltern, always recalled as related to men; as a wife, as a mother, as a sister to men, perceived to be in position of subordination to men.

Dr Rubina Saigol also talks about the consequences of the deeply rooted impact of colonization followed by war on terror and religious extremism as the major barriers in the way of gender equity and women empowerment. Thus, the right wing became dominant with fabricated religious movements like AL Huda phenomenon making "abaya" (veil) as a symbol of a woman's piety and also prohibiting women's participation in public spheres (Saigol, 2016). She also mentions the work of Asma Barlas [within religious paradigm] to unread the patriarchal assumptions of Quran. Another women rights activist named Riffat Hashmi presented alternative theological explanations to merge Islamic teachings and modern human rights discourse. (Saigol, 2016). Nevertheless, I would like to explore the role alternative 'Islamized' versions of feminism have played as a replacement of western feminism in the context of Aurat March.

Furthermore, as Amina Jamal (2005) presents in her work on feminist discourses in Pakistan that, the military-mullah alliance in Pakistan is the historically destructive relationship which has proved specifically oppressive for women and religious minorities in Pakistan. This is because military regimes have often bolstered their political control by harnessing the street power of religious groups, thus leading to the formation of politico-religious groups. I agree to her analysis on harnessing the street power of religious groups and making them part of the political representation in the country, as by doing this the military regimes have imposed the legal

framework in the country by the subjective interpretations of theology (Quran and Hadith) done by those politico religious parties.

Jamal (2005) in her essay on feminist discourses also talks about the formation of Women's Action Forum in Pakistan. She emphasizes that in 1981, it came out as a critical assembly of women challenging Islamization. The founding of this forum is considered significant for feminism in Pakistan since this movement arose a change in the elite's women understanding of their relationship with the state. Now, her focus on women's understanding with the state entails that, until 1977, urban upper educated upper- and middle-class women looked to the modernizing state in implementing women's rights but their faith on the state was shaken to a large extent by General Zia's control of the state.

Expanding on the notion of the state, the idea behind the creation of Pakistan was based on the equal provision of right to practice religion to the citizens. As Muslims in the sub-continent were unable to practice Islam freely as they were living with Hindus in the same country. The partition of the sub-continent proved to be a huge scale ethnic cleansing as the Muslims from India had to come to Pakistan and the Hindus and Sikhs of Pakistan had to cross the border and move to India. Therefore, the country was formed on an ideological hubris and that informs the legitimacy of Pakistan. The ideological leads to the political and legal fabric of the country to be derived from the Islamic theology and the reinterpretation of the theology is done by the politico religious groups. This brings forth the legal fabric to be oppressive for minorities of which women are a part aswell. However, Aurat March and its demands represent a divergence, a re-articulation of the very basic debate regarding human rights in the country. This brings us back to the backlash faced by the protests each year by the politico religious groups accusing that this march is promoting vulgarity and Western agenda of immorality. As this representation of the minorities is a debate

that questions the basis of Pakistan. As religion being a personal affair was exploited to create a land and a national identity.

Asef Bayat², in his essay on *what is means to be a woman activist in a Muslim state*, he presents the case of Iran. He discusses the consequences of an authoritarian Islamic regime on the Iranian women that enforced veiling, surveillance gender segregation and the annulment of laws that favored women. This led the women to resist not in the form of campaigns or movements but changing their daily practices and enforcing themselves onto the public spheres (Bayat, 2007). Though the contemporary resistance is not only at homes, its at the streets but it started off with Zia-Ul-Haq's regime during the Islamization period.

Saba Mahmud (2009) in her essay titled as "Religious Reason and Secular Affect: an incommensurable divide" beautifully talks about the polarization of religious extremism and secular freedom. She concludes based on the Danish cartoon controversy and other case studies that secular democratic states follow the regulations of the human rights charter of UN to maintain public order. In those states the sentiments of majority are considered to be of more weightage than those of the minorities as it better to maintain the state's equilibrium. Drawing parallels to those secular democratic states Pakistan, one can see that a country whose foundation is based on the name of religion which is a personal affair will lead to consequences of contradictory interpretations of religion and oppression. As the national identity is built around religion the ethos, values and traditions are bound to contradict bringing serious consequences to the minorities. This is what Aurat March raises its voice for. It raises its voices for those are not heard as they are not in the dominating majority. She also talks about the secularism and state. One of very interesting

² Asef Bayat is an academic and a director of Islamic Institute for the study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM) at Leiden University.

areas of her work, is the temporal changes in the secularism. She mentions that secularism has focused on reformation of religious values but not the complete separation of state from religion which is generally understood. She says: “*historically speaking, the secular state has not simply cordoned off religion from its regulatory ambitions but sought to remake it through the agency of the law.*” (Mahmood, 2009)

Furthermore, it is important to explore the concept of agency as the research aims to look into how this movement enables the women to claim agency. In an article written by Indian scholars Nripendra Kishore Mishra and Tulika Tripathi titled as *Conceptualizing Women's Agency, Autonomy and Empowerment*, agency is defined as the most important constituent of women's empowerment. According to them women's agency can only be operative if there is a fundamental shift in women's perceptions or if there is an inner transformation. This transformation entails that women are able to define the notions of choice and self-interest with a belief in themselves to not only be able but entitled to make their decisions. These scholars also add up by describing that agency can be put forward as thinking outside one's existing system and to challenge and question the status quo. They further argue that notions of legitimacy and obligations mould agency for women socially and that agency is based on moral judgement. (Mishra & Tripathi, 2011)

Moreover, Naila Kabeer define agency in her essay *Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment*⁴, as the ability of individuals to define goals and act upon those goals. For her, agency is much more than merely an observable action, it goes beyond the action to the motivation and meaning the agents bring with agency termed as the *sense* of agency. According to the author although agency is usually defined as the “decision making power” in the social science literature, it can be defined in number of other forms. It can

be defined as negotiation, manipulation, resistance as well as more immaterial cognitive processes such as reflection and analysis. It can be experienced by the individual as well as the collectives. (Kabeer,1999). Drawing on this definition of agency, the research aims to explore whether Aurat March becomes a platform for women to claim their agency with the sense and motivation of agency that comes out not only as tangible but also carries a meaning with it?

The term “agency” entails an important constituent for women empowerment, but empowerment is a broad concept and agency can be defined as just one important constituent of empowerment (Mishra & Tripathi, 2011). On the other hand agency is defined as the ability of an individual to set goals and act on those goals (Kabeer, 1999). On the other hand, Saba Mahmood in her book *Politics and Piety* (Mahmood, 2005) that is based on her eight years of ethnographic work in Cairo on the Muslim Mosques Movement, defines liberal agency as an ability to identify one’s own interests against customs, traditional ,transcendtal and other barriers (whether discrete or collective). Moreover, in contrast to the liberal view she presents the case of Egyptian Muslim women involved in the mosque movement. For her, what might be a submissive and docile understanding of these women according to the progressive view, might actually be a form of agency. But according to her, this form of agency can only be understood within the discursive structures of subordination that enable these conditions to be enacted.

Furthermore, on the notion of bodily agency Mahmood explains the ritual of a prayer. She describes that it entails for a means in terms of being a pious conduct transforming their daily practices and serves towards an end in terms of being an obligation by the God. This conduct reinforces the desire of worship in Muslims. Thus, according to her the desired aim of a pious worship becomes a mean to cultivate that desire and eventually making it desirable. Similarly, she gives the instance of Muslim women belonging from the Mosque Movement. The activities of

listening to Quran, conversing with each other about the theology etc were not in a conflict with basic liberties and liberal rights. She wanted to broaden the understanding of agency by her cross-culture comparison. But this characterization of agency by Mahmood raises some concerns as explained by Bharat Ranganathan who is a post doctorate fellow associate at University of Notre Dam in his article *Mahmood, Liberalism and Agency* (Ranganathan, 2016). He questions, on the above example of prayer by Mahmood, that these practices of self-cultivation might require one to preclude from doing other goods. He questions that what if these practices lead one to be deprived of his or basic rights and liberties? Similar is the case with these women, these women based on gender are thought to continue with the tradition of being involved in the practices related to the Mosques movement and their household. This delimits their right of pursuing other goods based on their gender.

Moreover, Saba Mahmood describes agency “as a capacity of action that, historically, relations of subordination enable and create” (Mahmood, 2005). Therefore, Mahmood’s definition of agency adds an important nuance i.e. the capacity of action created by historical relations of subordination. In simple words, the feminist theoretical conception of agency before Mahmood overlooks the historical and cultural relations that have restricted women to reach their full potential, or at least to reach the potential that men do in traditional patriarchal societies. Therefore, Mahmood, restricts the definition of agency itself, by arguing that agency, even if it reaches its full potential, implies restricted potential since women are dealing with historical structures limiting that potential. However, this thesis does not completely adhere to Mahmood’s argument where she restricts the definition of agency. This thesis argues that women agency, is not necessarily the capacity of action that historical relations enable. In fact, historical relations everywhere in the world, restricted women’s agency due to traditional patriarchal ideals. This

thesis argues for a comprehensive and complex understanding of agency. One where change and consistent positive progress possible is identified through certain variables that act as the constituents of agency. For instance, access to decision making power for their own life, access to employment, education opportunities, public advocacy and so forth. If a female lawyer presents an argument in court, it is taken as seriously as a man's, it constitutes a positive step forward in women's agency. On the contrary, Mahmood's definition restricts women to the limited access they have in societies where men enjoy the privileges of the production of knowledge, employment and education opportunities, control over their bodies and lifestyles. Similarly, this movement, Aurat March, begins by identifying certain visible variables, that clearly account for more control over women's own lives, thereby, clearly arguing for an expansion in their agency, their potential, eventually, liberating themselves from the historical relations of subordination, or at least, restricting the influence of historical or cultural relations of subordination. To give a concrete example, according to Saba Mahmood, women in Egyptian piety circles might not look as free as western women do, because they still veil, raise families and dress modestly, but they actually are almost as free as western women since they have taken control over the production of religious knowledge that is usually controlled by man. However, it still doesn't imply that this is the most any woman in Egypt can possibly strive for. This is because there are cultural, primarily religious relations of subordination, restricting their agency, just because they are women, and they have to appear modest, raise families and be accountable to the men around them. Saba Mahmood, eventually, overestimates the impact of the existence of a different cultural environment on the subordination of women. In simple words, if an Egyptian woman raised in a conservative family decides to drop out of religious education and become a fashion designer or a model, she might not be accepted by her family. However, if she becomes a female *Alim* (religious scholar), she will

still be respected, and as far as her religious knowledge is concerned, it might not have the same impact as her male counterparts, genuinely because she would be a woman.

This chapter focused on providing the intellectual insights on the feminist literature in terms of agency and body politics, it also provided the analysis of literature on state and politics of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Summarizing the chapter, it discusses the history of Pakistan and highlights the consequences of the inherent tensions in the country between conservatives and secularists since its creation. It also focuses on how these inherited tensions impacted the rights of women and other minorities in the country.

Chapter 2: Aurat March- Origins and evolution

This chapter will focus on the origins of the movement and the mobilization mechanisms it used to gain momentum. Looking at this carefully will help analyze the broader agenda of how this movement is a platform for women and minorities to claim their agency. Moreover, this chapter will also explore the dynamics of the movement and the socio-political fabric of the country.

8th March was officially formalized as International Women's Day by United Nations in 1975. Women's day aims to help nations eradicate discrimination, and grant social, political, economic, cultural as well as equal legal protection to women. Among other nations, Pakistan is also a signatory to the treaty called Conventions on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). This treaty was adopted in 1979 by United Nations General Assembly. Pakistan ratified CEDAW with an intention for an affirmative action as prescribe by CEDAW in 1996 the action entails that necessary action should be taken by all the signatory states to encourage parity and eliminate inequality between women and men in all walks of life. This leads one to argue that CEDAW might be the antecedent behind the legislation of protection against women at the workplace act. However, the practical application of such laws remains questionable in the country. Therefore, thinking of the aforementioned legislation it cannot be agreed upon that have we achieved our aim in male and female parity (Kakakhel, 2020)

This situation of having laws to protect women, yet not being implemented in the country brings us back to why the Aurat March is being held in multiple cities in Pakistan. One of the female respondents, Menahil Shahid who is a 21-year-old member of Aurat March identified the numerous loopholes in the act against women's sexual harassment at workplace. In a case

regarding sexual assault that was filed by a famous female singer *Meesha Shafi* against her male co-worker *Ali Zafar*, it was difficult for the court to decide how to define a “workplace”, which lead to further complications and eventually the case had to be dismissed.

This gives us a glimpse of how women remain largely unsafe in Pakistan. The whole country went into dark after the Islamization period with women and other minorities being the major victims. This era had severe negative effects on women as Pakistan being a third world country, (with a focus on survival rather than personal happiness) tend to be more traditional rather than focusing on secular values. This led the military dictator General Zia – Ul – Haq from 1977 to 1988, to lead in a traditional way focusing more on family and collective ties and making women economically and socially more dependent on man unlike the previous elite liberal leaders. But with the modest increase of wealth in the previous years, there is an increase in the upper / upper middle class with a brought up of liberal values. This class tends to promote and value the secular notions of individualism, personal autonomy, agency and empowerment for women. This leads to the conservative ends of the country to feel threatened and react against promoting ‘liberal’ values.(Dogra, 2020)

There have been three waves of women’s movement in Pakistan starting from the creation of the country till now. The first started since the nationalist struggle for the country and after the creation of Pakistan in 1947, where the priority for personal laws and rights to services were demanded. The second wave initiated in the late 20th century where the movement challenged the anti- women policies implemented by General Zia ul Haq under the frame of “Islamization of Pakistan”. Under the umbrella of Islamization of the state, he imposed certain laws targeting women’s emancipation in the social structure of the country. He limited women’s liberation by such state legislations while raising the slogans for women one of amongst them was “*chaddar*

aur chaar dewari” (women should cover their bodies fully and remain confined within the four walls of home). One of his legislation was imposition of “*Hudood Ordinance*” which meant that if a woman is a victim of rape, she must prove it by the presenting four pious Muslim men as the eyewitnesses of the incident. If she is not able to do so, she is accused of adultery and the punishment for this was 100 lashes. By the implementation of this ordinance, a large proportion of women were blamed for adultery upon demanding their right to justice. This proved not merely to be a law which blamed women based on their sexuality, but also a law which made it easier for men to mistreat women as the state was behind their back. This led to a number of cases where women were victimized first by rape, and later by the hudood charges and it caused to be one of the reasons to inflame the feminists at that time. (Batool et al., 2018)

Women from the second movement belong to urban middle class of the country and had studied from Western universities, were the founders of Women’s Action Forum (WAF). This era marked women producing extensive literature on feminist politics with a focus on increasing women’s political representation. During the years of 1988-1999, one of the first literature on sexual and reproductive rights in Pakistan was produced to raise awareness among women.

The third wave occurred after 9/11 till present, it attempts to separate the liberal feminism from the religious context in Pakistan and advocates about the rights of Muslim women through a non-liberal perspective. It fails to recognize the contribution of secular feminist movements towards women empowerment in the country. This wave gain momentum with the advent of social media and private media channels (Batool et al, 2018)

However, in the recent years, the younger feminists in Pakistan share the similarities with the Western feminism and postmodernism. They recognize the differences among women in different historical and cultural context, challenging the universal concept feminism. These unions

include collectives called as “girls at dhabbas” (small shops where usually truck drivers stop by to have tea), The Feminist Collective (knowing itself as a leftwing feminist group) and the “Hum Aurtein (Us Women) group. Therefore, in Pakistan there have been movements based on inequality and discrimination of women in major spheres of life.

There are two contemporary threads of feminism in Pakistan, the secular one and the religious or the Islamic one. The Islamic one, encourages women’s emancipation through Islamic principles and on the other hand secular feminists believe in elimination of oppression to minorities whether it is based on Islamic principles or not, thus religion being a private affair. The movement of “aurat march” stems from one of the collectives of the secular liberal feminist threads under the label of “Hum auraten” (Us Women). In 2018, women from across the country came out to the roads to reclaim their space in private and public spheres that was termed as Aurat March. This has appeared as a new wave in the country, but it was backlashed by many religious scholars, politicians and majority of men from the general public (Azeem, 2019). This shows the conflict of the various institutions in the socio-political fabric of the country. Moreover, Pakistan was ranked as the second worst country 2018 Gender Gap Report by The World Economic Forum and this shows the treatment of women in the workplace in a capitalist society. (Azeem, 2019). This, among others were the reasons women came out to protest on the streets of the big cities. But I want to understand what the ideology behind such a movement was which brought together women from different sects, classes and educational background together to streets and how is it related to religion, politics and social field of the country.

Most importantly, women’s mobilization in the form of the Aurat March refutes the belief that women are not conscious of their own oppression. Women have been resisting against patriarchal forces in the country in their own ways: sometimes subtle, at times overt. For a lot of

Pakistani women, mere survival is resistance. And occasionally, in a glorious, glorious feat, women are able to come together to lay patriarchy to rest on the streets of Islamabad, Karachi and Lahore (Shah, 2019). But this is much more than women coming out on streets to protest against the existing social situation. The question is of how they in an organization claim their rights, their agency and equality in the inter play of politics and religion?

“Aurat march” not only gathered the public attention but also a huge chunk of Parliamentarians and politicians were eager to know the hidden agenda behind this movement. It is quite interesting how one of the parliamentarians (Amir Liaqat) thought that someone is funding them and there is a huge political agenda behind this protest (Mohyidin, 2019). This is one of the many scattered directions of the concept of feminist movements in the country. This scenario shows the limited recognition of the feminist project, merely considered as the “other”. The concept of “other” by Spivak can be used in scenario as this protest is not taken into consideration by the politico-religious parties, and religious clerics as a feminist project but as a protest which is occurring based on a broader ‘political agenda’.

Women’s rights remains a debatable issue across the world, whether in the capitalist states, economically weak post-colonial states or economically developed Muslim majority states today. Patriarchy remains devastatingly prevalent approximately everywhere. Pakistan is a case where 57% of the adult women have received no education and additionally 16% have merely received primary education as mentioned in the book written by Anita. Weiss titled as *Interpreting Islam, Modernity and Women’s Rights in Pakistan* (2014). She adds up while mentioning that women constitute only 13% of the non-agricultural sector of the country and the parliamentary women representation worldwide is roughly 15% of the elected members as well as in Pakistan. This

limited access to education, marital choices, labour market, parliamentary representation bring forth vast implications on the understanding of women's rights in Pakistan.

Moreover, Weiss (2014) assigns four rudimentary labels to the lenses through which women's rights are viewed in Pakistan; traditional, orthodox Islamic, progressive and extremist. But these categories also appear to be questionable by looking at the enormous diversity within each one of them. Additionally, how the state has reacted to the progressive and Islamist groups by appropriating their ideologies for its own ends has also created cleavages within these socially constructed categories of rights. Furthermore, the intertwining of tradition and religion in Pakistan creates a confusion over where to draw lines between what is Islamic, what is tradition and how to define their distinct jurisprudence. For instance, the members of *madrassas* (religious schools) in Pakistan identify themselves to be close to the religion and Islamic values and tradition, but often confuse with what is non-traditional or non-cultural to be not in accordance to Islam. On the other hand, the progressive NGOs, networks and feminist projects such as *Shirkat Gah*, *Ham Aurtein*, *The Aurat Foundation*³ tend to question the jurisdictional space of Islam in the contemporary socio-political sphere and whether the rights of women necessarily be restricted by the Islamic injunctions at all.

With the recent rise of *Aurat March* in Pakistan, there is an interesting discourse between the thread of Islamic and the progressive thought. Those participants who took part in the march, faced immense backlash from the conservative groups of the country in the form of receiving death and rape threats afterwards the march. Those belonging to the religious thought and the right-wing groups label it with going against the Islamic values. On the other hand, those progressive groups

³ *Shirkat Gah* denotes *a place to participate*, *Ham Auratein* denotes *Us Women*, the *Aurat Foundation* denotes *The Women Foundation*. These are the progressive Non-Government Organizations working for causes of women's rights and emancipation in Pakistan.

organizing and supporting it respond to the backlash by mentioning that they are going faster than the society is able to digest and this will make conservative groups unlearn the toxicity that was inculcated in them by the society and the culture (Asher, 2020).

With these interesting standpoints to look at the movement, the notion of agency is an interesting concept to be explored. Agency has put our focus on how women have resisted or challenged or gained the access in the social institutions that had inclined to exclude, penalized or neglected them. For these women, who have been brought up under non-liberal values, agency used to be not an option. For them agency is a newly acquired phenomenon after getting enough education and awareness by social groups, media and feminist projects. They define agency as a capacity to raise their voice against oppression, an ability to speak for themselves when their bodily and political rights are snatched from them. For them it took a while to gain this awareness but as Mahmood claims the agency needs to be looked beyond resistance, it is that capacity for action that is built by historically specific relation of domination and subordination. For these women, only obeying the elders (male elders) most of the time was the right way and they appropriated agency by being good at domestic life, this awareness had brought with them a new meaning of agency, which is; having the ability to be vocal of their rights.

The notion of Aurat march came into action for the first time when a group of women protested to end sexual harassment and violence in the cities of Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad on International Women's day 2018. They first did so by mobilizing their networks and to raise their voice against violence. That tiny protest has evolved ever since, including transgenders to claim for better protection of women by enforcement of existing laws. This movement also initiated to raise awareness among the masses and to change the mindsets and attitudes of people. (Asher, 2020)

The planning and organizing of Aurat March was done by a diverse group of women from different ethnicities, classes and segments of society. The march itself was not part of an organization or a political party. But the major representation was from Awami Workers Party, the Feminist Collective, the Women's Collective and Girls at Dhabas (stalls) among a few others. As the main idea of aurat march was originated from Karachi's feminist network, therefore the numbers were not as great in Islamabad and Lahore, as were in Karachi still there was a significance presence to show solidarity.

The theme that revolved around that march was to get women out on the streets to reclaim their public spaces. According to an interview with Ayesha, a 22-year-old Political Science major and an organizer of Aurat March,

“By reclaiming our spaces, we meant that these public spaces were also our inherited right just as these are a right of men. We want to walk on the streets and roads just as safely as men are walking; without being stared upon, catcalled, harassed or ridiculed. We are not here to claim but to reclaim the spaces including the streets, roads, houses, workplaces, politics e which are inherently ours as a right”.

This shows the increasing awareness among women regarding their basic human right of expression. The rights that they were never aware of by being brought up in traditional households. These women after years and years of oppression and torture, finally came out to streets to reclaim the spaces that were according to them, inherently theirs. They raised their voices to speak for those who are not aware of their basic rights, they are using their privilege to fight against the oppression faced by the underprivileged women and minorities.

Aurat March 2019 brought diverse voices to the limelight as the Aurat March 2018 faced severe criticism on the basis of elite upper or middle-class women arranging the protest without any representation of women from other classes or other segments of the society. An interview with Aimen Bucha a female activist, feminist scholar and an organizer of Aurat March, she said:

“Aurat march saw a crowd like never seen before in any of feminist projects. People from all sectors of society came to join the March. The crowd was only among the groups that organize the Aurat March but women from working class, health workers, LGBTQ and Christian communities also joined. For the first time, the LGBTQ community felt safer and equally represented on a platform.”

This shows that Aurat March in 2019 made it to a bigger crowd, including many segments of the society. Those who were never represented or visible felt represented and raised their voices against oppression. Moreover, the government that acted neutral in Aurat March 2018, began to act in 2019 by granting the permission to March on such a huge scale including thousands of people; mostly women, along with provision of security. This showed that the government recognized the March in 2019.

Aurat March 2020, was organized on a massive scale with the main demand of economic justice for women and a manifesto. The march was attended by over 2000 people with the key demand to fight for economic justice and autonomy of women. Aurat march 2019’s backlash encouraged women to deal with all of the criticism with more strength and 2020’s Aurat March had women ready to chant the same slogan (my body, my choice) again while explaining it to the journalists on their press conferences with media. This slogan was meant to demonstrate women’s reproductive rights with a focus on giving women the liberty to make the decisions for their bodily rights. Those bodily rights included the decisions of dressing (to observe veil or not, to cover

themselves fully or not etc), sexual life and other bodily practices. But the misinterpretations of the slogans of the religio-political parties enabled women to be more resilient to the criticism and come out even stronger than the last time.

Nevertheless, Aurat march is a movement that encompasses the broader issues underlining inequality in the country. It not only voices the suffering of the women, but also the working class and minorities of the country. Therefore, the march originates as a result of inherent theocratic tensions in the country between the political representation and people's rights that started off with gender issues. Though this thesis focuses primarily on women and gender issues represented by the march, but it can also be interesting to look at the march from the angle of the intrinsic tension of state and people's basic rights.

3. Empirical analysis

This chapter aims to empirically analyze the data gathered from the in-depth interviews of the participants of Aurat March. It is divided into three sections that revolve around the notions of religion, agency and state. Based on the questions asked to the interviewees this chapter focuses on analyzing the responses based on the aforementioned theoretical framework of agency, feminism and politics in Pakistan. Moreover, it discusses the micro level concepts of spaces and agency, traditional values with the broader, macro level literature on these notions.

3.1 Women and religion

The identity of women in Pakistan is more than often considered instrumental to a man and his reputation. They are identified as a daughter, sister, wife, or mother and so on. Therefore, they are always involved in a constant dilemma of acting according to their own will or according to the will of a dominant man in their life. Therefore, if we apply Butler's concept of gender can be applied here, as the gendered identity of Pakistani women is constructed through the repetition of traditional acts, over time. For instance, the act of being a pious daughter, a caring wife, a nurturing mother and so on. In addition to that, feminism is also a concept that is not easily accepted in the country. As it challenges the gendered identity of women constructed over time and focuses on giving women equal representation in private and public spheres. It is a challenge for those feminists that have a brought up of a non-liberal background and are also a part of the Aurat March. The question of how they self – identify with these contradictory paradigms of religion and feminism came out as an interesting one to explore. In an interview with Ghania, a 22-year-old female organizer of Aurat March, she said

“On the question of how I negotiate between religion and feminism, Since , I live in the campus hostel and I don't have to face my family, so I do what I want to, I wear what I want to and

make my life decisions myself. On the other hand, I would like to say that is more of a performance of gendered morality in front of my family”

Ghania’s belongs to a small city in Pakistan so she lives away from her family at her university campus hostel/dorm. Her family belongs to one of the politico- religious parties of the country. Therefore, her family and extended family members hold a ‘traditional’ mindset that challenges the progressive beliefs and practices and endorses the normative understanding of the role of a woman in the household; a caretaker and a child bearer living in the four walls of home with rare access to the outside world. Thus, the act of performance comes in when she has to visit her family back home. She mentioned that if she tries to talk about her bodily agency and rights, she is labelled of being immoral. For her, a better way is to continue with the performance of morality until she returns back to her dorm in Lahore.

Upon asking the same question to another participant and organizer of Aurat March named Ayesha, she responded:

‘It is a challenge, it is frowned upon, you are misunderstood by the people. All the years of you growing up you see misogyny and then you see your mothers stressed about you raising your voice (though they want you to), but they are scared as we will get hurt, we will face the consequences. I decide to choose everyday how many steps I can take in that direction, how much energy I have to deal with a problematic terrain of thought. I can’t tell my family members and my relatives that they are wrong as I am going to be dead, (as shaking someone’s belief is considered to be blasphemous). I try to pick stuff from the daily practices we have in our daily lives implicitly and tell them in that way.’

This interview with Ayesha showed another angle of the dilemma faced by the women while living in a non-liberal household. As mentioned above, one is misunderstood and frowned upon. The role of other women around is also quite significant as over the years they have tolerated misogynist environment at their homes and society in general with the fear of harsh consequences. They were afraid of the severe consequences as they didn't have economic rights, were less educated and had no support from the family to leave the marriage. Over here, the concept of "Other" by Beauvoir is important as here the identity of the women as being instrumental to men is brought. The women in the family are scared that my respondent will face the sheer consequences in her married life if she claims for her rights boldly. This entails that even the survival of women is dependent on a man as she will not have any financial security. Therefore, they tend to inculcate the same submissive values in their daughters.

For Ayesha, the way to negotiate her space in this contradictory terrain of religion, traditional authority and feminism is that she passively tries to change the mindset of the people in her family by picking stuff from any daily practice and normalizes less misogynist practices in her household. As being explicit about their rights would lead them to being ridiculed, dehumanized or dead as girls get killed in the name of honor in the country. Therefore, being a woman, one has to choose her battles wisely. That is why Aurat March is a platform for these women to express their voices and claim their rights. These pieces show the dilemma of women belonging to two contradictory narratives at the same time. Their struggles and battles with themselves remain unexplored and hidden. These are the reasons why women go out on streets for a joint march.

3.2 Women and Agency

On the notion of agency, respondents had a strong viewpoint that this march has been helpful to generate the discourse of women's agency in the country. According to the respondents, this debate of agency has been absent for a long time from the political and social discourse. During the Covid-19 lockdown oppressed labour communities have been claiming for their rights to work based on the economic issues they are facing, and it has been important debate in the academia. But the debate of women and their agency in the country is a topic which is not the focus of academia and public discourse. However, the latest protest of aurat march this year on 8th March 2020 brought these issues to be on the table. This march was one of the reasons this discourse was being discussed openly on media platforms, courts and was the main topic of discussion at the tea parties at home. Not only were people from urban areas but from the rural areas were also involved in the discourse and the debate of agency has started. Before that only activists and organizers and participants of feminist protests were aware of it. The first step towards claiming agency on a nation-wide level was achieved on somewhat grassroots level with this latest protest in 2020 as thousands of people participated in this protest. The awareness of one's agency is the basic step to claim it, but unfortunately major segment of Pakistani women has been unaware of this that they were legally free to claim agency, as the freedom of speech is their basic human right.

Moreover, from the explanation of agency provided by Kabeer (1999) in his paper, and recounting from interviews I can say that the Aurat March has definitely provided women with a platform to claim not only the ability to define their goals but also with the ability to bring forth a sense of agency with them. By attending the Aurat March, women experience a sense of shared motivation to claim for their decision-making power and also experience this sense

of agency in a collective form as Kabeer (1999) mention that agency can be experienced by an individual as well as by collectives. These participants also become aware after their discourse during the meetings and sessions about the negative use of agency by the state as explained by Kabeer “*the capacity of an actor or category of actors to override the agency of others*” (Kabeer, 1999). The meetings and discourses held in the sessions of Aurat March enlightened them with the negative exercise of agency by the state and traditional authority by the use of coercion, violence and threat. The use of violence and threat is quite evident in the form of honor killings that is practiced in some tribal areas of Pakistan until today.

One of the posters displayed in the Aurat march, “*mera jism, meri marzi*” translated as “my body, my choice” caused a lot of highlight and backlash from the religious parties and media in general. As the religious clerics and the politico-religious parties accused these women of spreading vulgarity and Western agenda by such kind of placards. One video was circulated on social media where a religious cleric was threatening women, that if they can claim the rights to their body, then men can also claim the right to rape them (Asher, 2020).

The Aurat March 2020, led the politico- religious parties like Jamaate - e - Islami to organize their own protest named “Haya March” literally translated as “Modesty March” and also attacked the protestors in Islamabad (capital of Pakistan). One of the participants Ifrah Hassan, a 25- year old female who participated twice in Aurat March (2018 and 2019) with her mother and sisters in Islamabad says that if she was present in the country at the Aurat March she would have participated in the third Aurat March along with her mother. But she says that no matter how strong women felt during this protest, they are never secure in this country. She said she would have been deeply worried if her mother would have been there

without her as it was attacked by the protestors of the politico religious party that arranged a Modesty March against Aurat March.

The role of state was quite apparent as the religious extremists from the Modesty March were backed up by the government. On the other hand, a petition was filed days before Aurat March claiming that the slogans and posters of Aurat March promote non-religious and Western values. Though one of the female activists and a lawyer fought against the petition and won but these are the instances set a precedent for a collective protest like Aurat March to happen in Pakistan.

Moreover, Saba Mahmud puts agency in the Egyptian context in a different way than the feminist literature on agency suggests:

“I want to suggest we think of agency not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create”(Mahmood, 2006)

Drawing parallels to Mahmood’s explanation of agency, in a country like Pakistan where major section of men and women have deeply ingrained non-liberal values, the concept of agency in women is rarely brought into light. The capacity of action that the historically specific relations of subordination has created is ‘no capacity of action’. The phrase no capacity of action entails that these women with years and years of subordination have learnt not to act in the face of oppression. Therefore, the women belonging to a comparatively liberal background come forward in the form of march and protest for the other oppressive women of the country.

Not only women, but men are also unaware of women’s agency due to years and years of ingrained socialization as one male respondent Mohsin, explained his experience

“attending the Progressive Students’ Collective sessions⁴ made me realize that 8th March is women’s day. Small sessions on press club used to occur on women’s day but in 2018, we witnessed the Aurat March and has been occurring ever since”.

Another respondent Ayesha who is a political science major and of the organizers of Aurat March added when talking about agency that for her bodily agency of a women, in a social system different. In the context of the idea “*mera jism meri marzi*” this is the idea of agency that revolves. To reproduce, to sexually touch, to dress up whatever she wants. The right over her body, to be able to be consensually in a relationship or not. According to her, the idea of agency is relative, as the idea of agency over body was different during Islamization, now it has changed due to feminists like Asma Jehangir (women’s rights activist and a lawyer) and the feminist projects like Aurat March have managed to pull systems to change rape laws and laws in workplace to end harassment. What she meant by saying that the idea of bodily agency was different during Islamization period is that at that time women’s bodily agency was controlled by state in form of laws and ordinances (veil, rape laws). Over the period of time with the change in political regimes (authoritarian to democratic) and the social activism of women, those laws have been annulled and new laws have been formulated according to the UN charter of Human Rights. But still those laws are not implemented across the country. This entails that women on a massive scale still lack the awareness of the legal rights given to them. The seeds of submissiveness to oppression are so much ingrained in them that it will take a huge movement like Aurat March to enable them to rethink of their rights.

⁴ Progressive Students collective is a Lahore based organization including students belonging to universities country wide. It demands the right to form student unions in universities. Students union formation was a privilege given to student that was revoked under the dictatorship of army General Zia – ul- Haq. They organize various student solidarity marches in different universities across the country and also talk about the minority rights in the country.

3.3 Women and the state:

Upon asking from one of the respondents the question of state and the idea behind its creation affects the feminist movement, Marvri responded that their struggle as Pakistani women started from the regime of General Zia-Ul-Haq due to forced Islamization regulations specifically on women including imposed veiling in public spheres, hudood laws and family laws. Thousands of women were imprisoned after being raped as they were unable to prove them as victims based on the hudood laws. This led to women protesting on the streets for their rights. The case of Iran as Asef Bayat (2007) mentions with an authoritarian regime is similar to Pakistan in this way that it led the women to demand their rights that later formed into two threads: Secular and Islamic feminism.

Moreover, on the topic of state, respondents added that the status of the Pakistani women have been reduced to that of a minority. She added that in Pakistan women have been reduced to a minority with unequal political representation. There are less women in workplace and those are paid less wages as compared to men and abused by their co-workers and employers. Therefore, the March challenges the economic institution of the state as there is no recognition of women's labour. These respondents mostly had an affiliation with the leftist politics and demanded the appropriation of leftist ideas in the economic institution of the state. They were of the view that women are mostly given the triple burden as stated by the Marxist feminists⁵ ; the burden of reproduction, economic and financial subsistence and the maintenance of the household that goes unrecognized and consumes more time and energy than men. Therefore, the participants of the March also demand the equality of basic economic and human rights across all the social classes.

⁵ For further information on Marxist theory and women's labour:
https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/31653/8/08_chapter%202.pdf

This response can be related to Saigol's categorization of different kinds of feminists in Pakistan and her explanation of the Marxist feminists.

On the discussion on the religion and the state, respondents added that the motive of Aurat March is not the separation of religion and state perse but a country with the reformation of Islamic theological texts. It entails that the interpretation of theology should be done in a way that is unoppressive to women and minorities.

The respondents also tend to develop a sense of sisterhood by holding each other's hand a protesting against the oppression and patriarchy. They held the posters and placards saying: "funeral of patriarchy" or "warm up your food yourself", "my body, my agency". They tend to emphasize on "behenchara" (sisterhood) to march against the perception of the masses of women to be pulling each other's legs and always in competition. This march is not a competition, it is women hand in hand protesting against the patriarchy and claiming rights to public spaces.

On the discourse on patriarchy and state, the interviewees defined themselves to be radically against the patriarchal institutions of Pakistan namely military, state and religion. These respondents were not the "reformists" but the other kind that hooks talks about, the "revolutionists". As they demanded the structural changes where patriarchy and oppression are situated, instead of merely discussing the reforms they strongly stand against the state in terms of structural flaws and look forward to a revolution.

Those participants coming from a more religious background said that the legal framework of the state that was said to be based on Islamic principles was "unIslamic" in nature itself. By unIslamic they meant that for instance the hudood ordinance reduced women to below the level of a human being as if they were raped, they had to prove the incident by the testimony of male

witnesses and if there is a female witness it had to be more than one. So even the testimony of one woman watching another woman being raped wasn't enough. Though on the other hand a testimony provided by one male witness was enough. Therefore, it means that the members of the movement want the unoppressive interpretation of the theology so. So that such patriarchal laws are not imposed upon the masses. This side of the demands seems to be plunging towards the Anarcha feminism which is a combination of anarchism and feminism. This is the ideology that considers patriarchy to be the cause of the involuntary hierarchy. For these feminists, struggle against patriarchy is the essential to class struggle and to abolish the capitalist state as they believe that the state is inherently patriarchal (Sethi, 2020).

Additionally, the women participants had a sense of security as they said that they haven't felt more secure in a crowd before. This sense of security entails that they were free from the sense of sexual harassment, molestation or touching without consent. They were not afraid being catcalled by the men around them, they were not afraid of being stared upon by men based on their physical attire. The identity of women is that of a *subaltern*, as Spivak mentioned in her essay that these women were unable to talk about their rights and secure agency. Similarly, the case of Pakistani women in the contemporary Pakistan is that of Subalterns where they are not secure, they can be raped and then be accused of the rape based on their dressing. This is what Aurat March tries to eliminate as the respondents recounted of being safe for the first time in a crowd of people belonging to different segments of society.

Summing it up, the organizers of this movement aimed to continue their struggle until or unless their demands are considered by the state. So far, the March participants consider it to be successful in providing awareness to the oppressed sections and gaining momentum in the numbers. However, the organization team still comprises of somewhat elite or urban class educated women.

This seems problematic in terms of the accessibility to the lower- and working-class section of the society. As these women have limited access to that section as recounted by one of the participants. The March will be more representative if the working class women are included in the organization teams.

4. Conclusion

Aurat march started off with a negligible number of women protesting against sexual harassment at workplace but gained massive momentum in the years following 2018. It has altered the terms of the debate surrounding gender issues, sexual harassment, domestic violence, minority rights, and patriarchy. The debate of agency started to take place in the daily discourse of households and tea parties especially when the Aurat march 2020 was about to be held.

The participants of Aurat march have been demanding structural changes in the country's legislations and legal framework. The findings from the interviews show that these activists consist of a diverse segment of society with clear and strong demands. Moreover, the demands have been increased with the passage of time and have taken a form of a manifesto that comprises of a detailed version of all the claims. With the organization and structure of the Aurat march in 2020, it seems that the movement will gather more momentum in the coming years. As it is now limited only to some cities (Islamabad, Karachi, Lahore, Hyderabad) of the country, it seems possible to speculate that it might reach more cities in the coming years.

With the rise of Aurat march, the long absent debate of agency started in the country in the form of local media discourse, daily discourse of urban middle class and lower-class families. Agency was linked with the terms like claiming for decision making power, ability to set one's own goal and work on those goals. Most of the women had a non-liberal brought up and it was difficult for them to negotiate their space in the contradictory terrains of feminism and religion. But with the platform like Aurat march, they were able to leave their domestic confinements and

march for their rights in a public space. Many of the participants weren't even allowed to step out of their houses without permission on a daily basis if they weren't fully covered. This presents the popularity of Aurat march among the masses, specifically the oppressed ones.

The feminist in Pakistan is still continued with the pioneer Islamic feminists arguing that Islam provides women with dignity and endorses their self-esteem more than any religion, philosophy or even secularism and the secular feminists on the other hand arguing that women should be given equal rights irrespective of their religious or cultural identities. Aurat March becomes a movement that takes this debate further to the coexistence of Islamic and secular feminism as it is supported by a few Islamic feminists.

The secular feminists as Afia Zia, pointed out needs to resolve two problems, one is that they need to reassure that their position is political that is based not on the absolute separation of state and Islam per se, but is about the separation of religion from the policies of the State, the undoing of the Islamic legal system along with its supportive institutions and clerical organizations. This is an easier position for the feminists to adopt rather to eliminate the term "secular" altogether. Secondly there is an urgent need to understand that neither the post-secularist nor the modernist explanation will limit politico-religious extremism in Pakistan as evident in the faith based violence in Pakistan. On the other hand, the post-secularist approach is more likely to get rationalized with the radical discourse as a political substitute for the Western rights and equality in Pakistan.

Considering the case of Aurat March, women's own experiences based on the reaction and backlash by the politico- religious groups suggest that under such circumstances hope for equal rights and justice is nearly impossible yet achievable. For the Islamic republic of Pakistan such secular expression and criticism must be permitted and the political institutions must endorse some

bearing on the public institutions, country's jurisprudence and social relations. This is only possible if the religious identity is embraced by the country without any ambiguity and ambivalence. This is best understood by the women, the working classes, minorities and feminists of Pakistan.

It can be speculated that the movement after their initial claims are recognized, works towards a more tolerant and democratic society. As Ian Talbot mentioned, that Pakistan went through a lot of structural failures but still has a potential to undo the harm done after the decades of its creation. It would be more interesting to explore Aurat march further by doing a field research or an auto ethnography during next March (2021) as that would allow interviewing participants from all segments including working classes, Islamic feminists and transgenders.

Overall, this movement has rich insights to offer for feminist theory, contemporary women rights discourses, debates on Islam versus modern human rights and feminism. To conclude, specifically discussing Pakistan, this movement has penetrated through the barriers created by several decades of oppression and has brought people from different social, religious, educational, demographic and economic backgrounds beginning from one simple demand i.e. gender equality. It showed how the symbolic differences between the so-called eastern and western feminisms might paint vague pictures when compares, and how equal rights can be demanded by a feminist movement in such a complex society.

APPENDIX

Snapshots from the Aurat March manifesto 2020



Aurat March Lahore: Manifesto for 2020

Aurat March is a collective of feminist women, gender and sexual minorities who stand against patriarchal structures that results in sexual, economic and structural exploitation of women. We come together in solidarity, on equal terms, without any funding or association with corporations, non-profits or political parties.

We seek to ensure intersectional politics that view gender in relation to various oppressive and unjust structures. We aim for our struggle to eradicate brutal and inhuman economic and social systems that suppress all, including men, by imposing gender roles that censure feminine men, masculine women and transgender people alike.

Aurat March is part of a movement towards collective action and consciousness building for a socially just and equitable society. We march for the following demands, built around the theme of خود مختاری (self-determination) through which we seek to reconstruct the narrative on violence against our bodies, economic conditions and the environment by both society and the state.

1. End to Economic Violence

- a. We demand that the labour of all women, gender and sexual minorities be recognised and accorded dignity without discrimination. All persons should be accorded a living wage of at least Rs. 40,000 a month (with increments equal to the level of inflation). We demand legal protections for workers in informal, home-based and agricultural sectors, who face disproportionate exploitation, harassment and violence;
- b. We demand an end to discrimination in employment, particularly in regard to wages and benefits;
- c. We demand that the government of Pakistan end all neoliberal austerity measures, undertaken at the behest of the IMF or otherwise, particularly in the health, education and food sectors, which impact working-class women, youth and migrants the most. The government must take onboard working-class women as stakeholders when regulating the prices of basic commodities;
- d. We demand that existing laws such as the Punjab Domestic Workers Act 2019 be immediately notified and implemented through effective oversight bodies;
- e. We demand that the government facilitate women's access to paid-work through provisions of free and quality childcare facilities;
- f. We demand safe and dignified workplaces. The definition of the workplace should be expanded and the consequently implemented to encompass formal, informal and semi-formal sectors; including independent and sub-contracts workers with written or other contracts under the 'Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2010'.



g. We demand that the right to unionise be upheld legally and in-practice. We demand that women and oppressed minorities be duly included in the labour movement. This is essential in building a strong and united anti-capitalist movement;

h. We demand that women's contribution to the care economy through home-making and caring for families be recognised as unpaid labour, categorised as 'work' and financially compensated for accordingly;

i. We demand the elimination of discrimination in and non-implementation of inheritance laws which lead to the denial of property rights for women and sexual minorities;

j. We demand an end to the practice of dowry and bride price, which are a form of economic violence and perpetuate the commodification of women and marriage as a transaction;

k. We demand that Pakistan recognise wealth created in marriage as joint property of both spouses.

2. End to Violence Against Our Bodies

a. We demand an immediate and complete end to gender-based violence against vulnerable genders, in both offline and online spaces;

b. We recognise that children are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence. The state should take robust steps to protect them. Such violence is traumatic and often comes from within trusted circles, making it more difficult to hold perpetrators accountable. We demand compulsory education and counselling on 'good touch/bad touch' and personal health in all public and private schools;

c. We demand robust policing mechanisms to prevent sexual abuse, investigate and prosecute perpetrators and rehabilitate survivors;

d. We demand the enactment of anti-discrimination laws to ensure the eradication of discrimination on the basis of gender and sexual identity, in addition to other racial, ethnic and differently-abled identities;

e. We call for an end to state-driven violence in the form of police brutality and violence, especially towards women and trans-people; we demand increased accountability for law enforcement by the state;

f. We agitate for decriminalisation and reform of defamation and procedural laws to ensure that victims and survivors of sexual violence and harassment are not silenced or intimidated;

g. We demand the introduction of witness protection programmes to protect witnesses in cases of sexual harassment and assault. We demand that 376A Pakistan Penal Code, 1860 be implemented to

Aurat march

Semi structured interview

Q1. When and how did you become a part of Aurat march?

Q2. What do you associate with Aurat march?

Q3. What is the agenda of Aurat march? What were the themes around which it had been revolving since 2018?

Q3. How would you define women's agency in a country like Pakistan? And how has Aurat March helped women and minorities claiming it?

Q4. How would you define feminism?

Q5. How do you self-identify or negotiate the space between the contradictory narratives of Religion on one hand and Feminism on the other?

Q6. How do you deal with the backlash by the society? Promoting Western agenda?

Q7. Do you question the religious, traditional authority?

Q8. What kind of a role is has been played by the state regarding feminist projects and more specifically Aurat march?

Q10. Do you question the legitimacy of the idea of the creation of Pakistan? If yes, then how?

Q9. How far has the Aurat March come in terms of its aims, goals?

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