

BACKLASHES TO AURAT MARCH IN PAKISTAN: OPINIONS OF ORGANIZERS AND OPINION LEADERS

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ABSTRACT

This study attempted to explain the difference in opinion between the Aurat March organizers and the religious leaders. In-depth interviews were conducted with Aurat March organizers and religious leaders. Thematic analysis is implied to analyze interviews. The study concluded that in the perspective of Aurat March organizers, Aurat March is a symbolic movement for strong resistance against discrimination exploitation and suppression of women in private and public lives. Aurat March is the continuity of the legacy of the feminist movement in the country. Posters of Aurat March were the real voices of women's everyday experiences and undressed issues. On the contrary, religious leaders believed that all the raised demands in Aurat March were immoral and challenging to religion. From their perspective, Aurat March aiming to destroy the family system and create chaos against the religion.

Keywords: Aurat March, women, religious leaders, women's movement, women's rights.

INTRODUCTION

Women's movements have evolved across the world to confront social, economic, political and cultural disparities to challenge inequalities against women's marginalization and focus on achieving societal changes. In Pakistan, the women's rights movement emerged soon after independence with the core focus on women's political rights, inheritance rights and family laws. Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's era was also enlightening toward women's rights and Constitution 1973 also protected women's rights (Ain, 2016). The conflict between state and emerging voices for rights resulted to influence the most excluded groups of society that targeted women and minorities. Islamization was the contributing factor to women's resistance to discriminatory laws and emerged contemporary women's movement (Khan & Kirmani, 2018). The military and religious group interventions were the major contributory factors that oppressed women's rights with the implications of various laws (Farida, 2010). Women-headed organizations in Pakistan were apolitical before the Hudood Ordinance in 1979 and their work was mainly on social welfare, with a priority on women and children (Imran & Munir, 2018). The submissive circumstances were created by the state after the independence of the state. The state has implied cultural roles to women and created an injustice state for women (Weiss, 2012). A holistic transformation is needed in society to attain equal status for women. Feminists' extreme resistance against the religion and culture in indigenous societies could result in backlash, exploiting and alienating the very women they purport to protect (Shah, 2014). Transformation in the current movement is also under debate. The negative impact of funded projects is also being debated at a higher level. The debate is whether these funds and NGOs support the cause of the women's movement or are a setback (Shaheed, 2010). As Pakistan's women's movement changed, the energy within the movement was flagged, while women's organizations evolved into dynamic places of employment (Shaheed, 2019).

There are conflicting perceptions in the socio-economic and political context regarding women's status in Pakistan (Weiss, 2012 & Weiss, 2003). In recent times it is observed that women's rights resistance is against socio-cultural practices (Saigol, 2016). In 2018, Aurat March started with a small number of women protesting sexual harassment in the workplace, but it quickly grew in popularity in the years that followed (Iqbal, 2020). Aurat March was inspired by the #metoo

movement and various women's marches throughout the world. Feminists of Karachi have called on all feminist organizations in the country to organize Aurat Marches (Shaheed, 2019). It appeared to be a forceful movement with a clear goal of reclaiming public places and power (Akhtar, Aziz & Almas, 2021). Aurat March has seen more resentment from many communities of different religions that were not supporting this march because of the cultural values of their country (Khushbakht & Sultana, 2020). The main issue of debate was the socio-religious status of the slogans in society which claimed itself to be religious or Islamic. The Aurat march stirred a heated debate among all social classes and intellectual groups (Tarar & etl., 2020). The history of women's march can be traced in 1789 when thousands of women protested against the high price of bread (Thelily, 2019).

The Aurat March received strong criticisms from religious groups in 2019 and followed in coming years as well. In Pakistan, the achievements of feminist movements have led to a number of laws and policies in support to women. But it has been a challenging task for women activists to raise their voices for women's rights. The movements have various pressures and hurdles in the process of making marginalized voices public and acceptable. Historically and in contemporary times, religious groups are significantly critical of the women's movements. As Neelam (2019) stated that on February 12, 1983, women protested in Lahore against Zia ul Haq's proposed Law of Evidence and fatwas were passed invalidating their marriages and declaring their children illegitimate. Women were labelled as prostitutes, *kafirs* and agents of international agencies and accused as elitist women. This research study attempted to investigate the difference in opinion about Aurat March between the Aurat March organizers and the religious leaders.

The objective of the study

The objectives of the research were to;

- To know the backlashes and reasons of criticism to Aurat March.
- To identify the differences of opinions between organizers and religious leaders regarding the Aurat March.

Research Questions

The research questions of the research were that;

1. What are the motives of Aurat March in views of Aurat March Organizers and the religious leaders?
2. What are the reasons of the criticism of Aurat March?
3. What are the perceptions of Aurat March Organizers and the religious leaders regarding the impact of Aurat March?
4. How do Aurat March organizers and religious leaders look into the aspects (strengths and weaknesses) of Aurat March?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Aurat March – Backlashes and Controversies

Feminism is really a myth developed by the elite class for their own special interests. There is a clear contradiction between Islamic feminism and the fourth wave of radical feminism in Pakistan in these marches. Aurat March for the rights of women is a scam, led by elite-class women. Women all over the world are hunting for discrimination and injustice. Unfortunately, the new movement or wave of feminism it's more radical feminism, which is disturbing the family system and structure of Islam and promoting western norms and western culture. They do not discuss the actual issues and rights they are being deprived of. The movement must evaluate this as a Muslim nation before implementing policies or pursuing external objectives. Among the leaders of the march, no one can name a leader which is from the lower class (Khushbakht & Sultana, 2020). Aurat March has grown contentious in Pakistan because to its lack of association with religion in a country where religious views are strongly held. Religious parties and intellectuals reacted angrily to the lack of involvement, branding it an anti-Islamic campaign (Naz, Shahid & Irshad, 2022). Islam guarantees all types of women's rights and liberties, ensuring their protection, respect, and dignity. It's also worth noting that Islam does not make earning responsibility for women, but rather a right rather than a duty. There is an urgent need to confront these impacts in the context of moral and legal approaches (Saeed and Leghari, 2019).

Historically, direct clashes between the religious and the rights-based women's events have been rare, since ideological boundaries have always been mutually respected. For decades, women of

the right-wing political parties have observed International Women's Day and participated in United Nations conferences (Zia, 2013).

Another reason for the backlash against Aurat March is its organizers' lack of conceptual or political preparation which has landed them in a predictable religious-patriarchal trap that could have been avoided, if they had cultivated ideological and strategic clarity in equal measure to their creative performative politics. Their events are always clearly thematically framed around the political and social agenda of the religious party or movement – usually on 'the family' and women's roles as dutiful mothers, wives and daughters within the private realm, and in service of Islam (Shehrbano, 2022).

Slogans of Aurat March

The language used in the posters was focused and intended to disseminate non-Islamic thinking among the populace. The language used in Aurat March 2019-2020 indicates non-Islamic ideology since it chooses crude and rough linguistic patterns that are forbidden in a Muslim country like Pakistan. The march was staged by Pakistani women to give expression to rights, but the misuse of language in placards reveals that they want a sex-free society, as observed in the West. Slogan language can influence people's ideologies and the terminology employed in chants is distorted in order to contaminate Pakistani Muslim society's pure Islamic doctrine (Ali, Cheema, & Dang, 2020).

Status of Women movements and activism in Pakistan

Women were classified as liberal or conservative and shared their experiences and narratives about feminism and Nationalism. Many of the liberal informants bemoaned misogynistic society and hurdles they faced in demanding equal opportunities for women. Women's activism is influenced by their religious views and their religious interpretation of feminism and nationalism in Pakistani society (Anjum, 2020). The Aurat March movement in Pakistan has become a cultural signifier for its supporters and critics. Feminism is the opposition of patriarchal system's way of reinforcing binary and black-and-white constructs—perceived good feminism/bad feminism where good constitutes the demand of health care and education rights and bad constitutes marital, sexual, and bodily autonomy, political/legal rights, economic equality, reproductive rights, and minority's rights. Feminism delayed is feminism denied. Feminism is about choice, freedom, liberty, empowerment, justice, and equality. (Mukhtar & Mukhtar, 2022). In 2018, a new wave of younger feminists took their rage against patriarchy, male violence, moral policing of women's bodies, and suppression of sexual choices for women and marginalized genders to the streets of Pakistan. Since then, International Women's Day on March 8th has been reclaimed from what had become a mundane, NGO-led, celebratory, cake-cutting event of former years (Saigol & Chaudhry, 2020).

In recent accounts of the relationship between Islam and women, Pakistani women's activism in political and religious movements is on the rise. Such debates are becoming popular in feminist political literature which seeks to understand and explain the position of Muslim women as activists. Sometimes, Pakistani feminist scholarship on women is referred to in the literature as fundamentalist. The provocative slogans and performative activism of these events have attracted misogynist and conservative backlash that have escalated with each successive year. Nongovernmental organizations focusing on women's concerns must work together to effect these structural changes. While battling religious and sexist nationalism in Pakistani culture, many liberal female activists and artists deviated (Zia, 2018). As (Zia, 2021) argued that Aurat March movement in Pakistan has become a cultural signifier for its supporters and critics. The extremist people attacked misogynies and unleashed their full fury on this feminist festival. These reveal the sinister palate of Pakistani patriarchy that comprises men, military and *mulla* politics. There was nothing subtle about the core focus on sexuality in these Aurat March events in the main cities which even included some fringe demands for LGBTQ rights that did not exist on the map of resistance politics prior to these events (Khatri 2020). Mohyidin (2019) argued that the provocative slogans and performative activism of these marches predictably drew misogynist reaction and conservative backlash in mainstream media, and death threats over unregulated social media platforms. In Pakistan, as in many other societies, politico-religious movements or so-called Islamist fundamentalist movements are becoming an important site for women's activism as well as the harnessing of such activism to promote agendas that seem to undermine women's autonomy. Mojab (2001) argued that the Islamization of gender relations has created oppressive patriarchy that cannot be replaced through legal reforms. In the past, the movement was pushed to new heights of activism when faced with the same threat. Feminists in Pakistan find

themselves in a predicament: a non-critical stance towards tradition and culture, though more acceptable to society, seems to betray feminist principles. Over the last few years, women's organizations have been specifically targeted by violent fundamentalists who have even resorted to hurling hand-grenades at the offices of women's NGOs. The women's movement in Pakistan is facing politically powerful religious fundamentalists. The position of women in Pakistan (and in other countries) is the product of specific, historical, political, and cultural forces and it should be analyzed as such. This is not to say that there are no similarities between the conditions of women living in Muslim and non-Muslim countries across the globe. There certainly are. But these similarities do not exist apriority; they are actively produced. It is this process of "making" women and defining womanhood in different contexts that should be the focus of feminist and transnational feminist inquiry into the lives of women in Muslim countries (Jamal, 2009)

Identified gap in the literature review

The review of literature provides an insight into the backlashes faced by Aurat March, reasons for criticism and the status of women's activism and movements in Pakistan. But the literature is limited to providing an understanding of the differences of opinions of different stakeholders of the march. As this movement gets public momentum in Pakistan and is highly debated in public spaces so the role of opinion leaders is crucial in this regard. This particular research study aims to address the gap and attempts to know the differences of opinions between organizers and opinion leaders of Aurat March.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The qualitative research method was applied to conduct this research. In total twelve interviews were conducted with Aurat March organizers and religious leaders. The study sample consists of eight Aurat March organizers women and four opinion leaders (Muslim) which includes two women and two men. Thematic analysis is implied for the data analysis.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Purpose of Aurat March

According to the Aurat March Organizers, Aurat March was initiated with the inspiration from #metoo movement. The central purpose of the Aurat March was to commemorate International women's day by asserting women's independence. Internationally, 8th March is commemorated as International women's day (Khan & etal., 2020) Aurat March is an organic movement that seeks to build coalitions among women in order to strengthen their voices and increase awareness of women's rights.

It is a non-funded event and serves as a collective forum for all like-minded people working for women's human rights. Aurat March raised the issue of the impact of capitalism and neoliberalism on the economics of women. Aurat March was aimed to raise awareness of women's suffering reproductive rights, domestic abuse, equal pay in the workplace, maternity leave, sexual harassment, and sexual assault (Iqbal, 2020). Aurat March is an initiative to connect women with the feminist movement and to raise women's rights violations through the language of common women. The participants come up with their own slogans which reflect their own lived experiences of violence and discrimination. Aurat March is aimed to highlight the brutality of patriarchal structures in society.

“The common purpose was that the 8th March is an International Women's Day, so we need to show collective solidarity.” (Organizer)

“The main purpose of AM was to lead the women's movement in Pakistan. AM provides a platform to raise voices for women's rights and amplify women's rights voices.” (Organizer)

Whereas religious leaders believed that the concept for the Aurat March is western. It is one of the foreign-funded activities of NGOs. A few women are influenced by the western idea of women's liberation and now they are planting it in Pakistan through activities like Aurat March. Aurat March is aimed to promote western culture by implanting vulgarity in society through such rallies. It also intends to demolish the family system in society. Aurat Marches are to harm culture, encourage vulgarity and participants are a few so-called modernized individuals who are doing it without

understanding the cultural context of the society. These people are opposed to marriage and family structures. Aurat March is calling for a free society free of socio-religious constraints.

“The hidden agenda of Aurat March was against our culture, values, and esthetics. The Aurat March women only have a vulgarity flag. (Religious Leader)

“Aurat March is a western idea, there is no connection between Aurat March and Islam. A few people thought that women of Pakistan should be free (Azad ho) and should not follow any kind of control. Aurat March’s only purpose is to promote vulgarity and live-in relationships, break the family system, to end the marriage system.” (Religious Leader)

Issues Raised in Aurat March

According to the Aurat March organizers, Aurat March organizers make open calls for volunteers through social media. Once they have volunteers, all the regions call open meetings to develop a charter of demand. Aurat March is an open space for all the people and encourages women to bring their own posters and slogans in their own language. Participants are free and encouraged to bring their own posters. Issues raised by the participants included; women's health, girls' education, economic justice, sexual harassment, discrimination at home, body rights, child abuse, patriarchal structures, transportation, domestic workers' rights, minority rights, missing persons, and other human rights violations are included in it. Aurat March highlighted the issue of forced conversion of minority women which is underreported. All the raised up issues were the reflection of women's experiences which they raised in the march.

“In charter of demand we mention those issues which are not getting attention by the people and state to address.” (Organizer)

“All issues which are highlighted by women are based on patriarchy and misogyny. We do not give posters and banners to women, it’s all their own choice to raise posters of their own choice. We do not invalidate any issue which is raised by any women in the AM. Every issue is important for someone.” (Organizer)

In contemporary, religious leaders had the view that the basic purpose of the Aurat March is to let down the teaching of Islam and destroy family culture in Pakistan. Slogans raised in the Aurat March were against the family system and were disrespectful to male family members. Immoral issues were raised in Aurat March. Aurat March is raising the demand of society for free sex and destroying the marriage institution. All the raised demands were against the Islam and promotion of western culture. All organizers’ women are funded and manipulated by some external agencies and individuals.

“The AM is raising the issues like “I am not answerable to my father and brother”. If the AM is aiming for the cause of women’s rights they should represent all issues of women’s lives, why do they highlight only one issue of freedom (azadi) and play songs along with the raising immoral demands?” (Religious Leader)

Aurat March Posters

According to the Aurat March organizers, the posters were about women’s rights which include; dignity rights, body rights, individual privacy, invisible labour of women, violence in the family, and workplace harassment. The posters were organic and reflected the issues women face in their life. Traditionally, women are not encouraged to speak up about the violation in the name of family, Aurat March provided a platform for those unspoken issues and violations. At the household level, most women are overburdened and suffer domestic-level discrimination and violence. Most of the participants also shared that in the last few years a number of violence and killings were reported in the media for not making and serving a hot meal and round shape *roti*.

According to all the organizers, there was nothing wrong and immoral with the posters. The posters were misinterpreted and edited. There was a lot of criticism and hype created on the language of posters. Posters were also labelled as vulgar and immoral organizers explained the controversial posters. Most of the criticism on Aurat March happened due to the posters and slogans. The slogan

"my body, my right" was about women's reproductive health. Women are suffering a number of reproductive health issues but that slogan was interpreted as an immoral demand. The slogan on body rights was a reflection of women's dignity but it was perceived as an attack on moral and cultural values (Khatri, 2020).

The real issue is that people are afraid to talk about family violence against women (Memon, 2021). So this is the women's right to speak up and raise voices on the violation of their rights. There is no control over the freedom of expression by the organizers, also people have the right to reflect their voices. Placards were straightforward and sarcastic (Kamal, 2021).

"In the poster "apna khana, khud gharam Karlo", the underlined issue is that women are doing a lot of invisible labor in the homes but meanwhile we have seen many cases in the news on the media that women are beaten for not serving food on time, served cold tea or didn't make the round roti ". (Organizer)

"There is not that women are treated as marginalized but also their movements are declared as controversial." (Organizer)

Meanwhile, according to all the religious leaders, the posters were vulgar, shameful, and give a wrong depiction the society. All the posters were against the family system, marriage, culture, and religion. Immoral demands were raised through these posters. Posters were against family relationships and an attempt to let down the family system. Posters' slogans were against Islam and demanded immoral freedom. Participants came to the Aurat March with the mindset to speak against the family system and marriage. Some of the controversial posters were not supported by the Aurat March organizers. Posters were against the religion and challenged the social roles of women which Islam obligated on women.

"There was a lot of vulgarity in the posters, we feel so ashamed by those posters. Our brothers and fathers are the crowns of our heads. AM presented a different type of male family members. AM presented a very wrong picture of our society." (Religious Leader)

"There was a poster in AM "apna moza khud talash karlo" which was wrong. According to Hadees, women are the caretakers of their husbands, children and home. So a husband ask her wife about the lost socks otherwise who else can. Also there was a poster "apna khana khud garam karlo" so it is also wrong because a woman is the head of the home, she is responsible to serve food to her husband." (Religious Leader)

Criticism on Aurat March

Aurat March is being criticized in online and offline spaces. In the Pakistani society, use of liberal attitude and even the use in language is considered as a hazard towards religious, social and moral values that could be afforded only by elite class particularly when it comes to women (Nasir, Riaz & Mirza, 2021). The main reasons for criticism are; religious extremism, patriarchal structures, misinterpretation of slogans, biased reporting from media, and state silence towards religious extremism. The opponent of the Aurat March considered it against the family system and anti-cultural propaganda (Qamar, 2020). Patriarchal systems operate by oppressing one gender to establish the superiority of the other (Cynthia, 2017). Social media is also being used as a tool to create a conspiracy against Aurat March. In the history of Pakistan WAF (women action forum) was also criticized for demanding equal rights for women in the country. In the past, the women's movement was not much confrontational, and the less vocal. The contemporary women's movements are more confrontational and have more media coverage. The participants of the Aurat March were not looked vulnerable women and their resistance was to demand rights instead of a request for rights. One of the major reasons for criticism is the resistance and protest by empowered women. Collective voices of women to demand rights is a fear of a patriarchal society. Religion is used to create hatred towards Aurat March. Aurat March organizers are accused of being rude because of open and vocal reflection on women's rights violations.

“Participants are raising the issues of body rights and highlighting the discrimination at the domestic level like “Apna Khana, khud gharam Karlo”. Because the criticism is started from home. But when the AM participants raised these domestic level discriminations in the AM, it is being mocked by the people but in actuality, these are serious issues.” (Organizer)

On the contrary in the perspective of religious leaders that Aurat March organizers used harsh language in the posters (of Aurat March) and in the talk shows which cause less support for Aurat March from the society. Instead, to struggle for women’s rights, Aurat March is campaigning against the Islam (Khan & etal., 2020). Feminism is not an indigenous movement and it damaged the credibility of the feminist movement (Batool & Malik, 2021). In Islamic society like in Pakistan cooking a meal is the duty of women but women in Aurat March Pakistan demand freedom from household chores (Ali, Cheema & Dang, 2020). Also, Aurat March is initiated by modern women who are not religious and unaware of the rights of local women of Pakistan. All the demands and slogans of Aurat March are against the social and cultural norms of Pakistani society. Aurat March is against the family system and putting efforts to destroy the family culture. Portraying the liberal image of the country is also a reason for the criticism of Aurat March.

“Every country and society has its own ethics, culture, and values. If AM works within the culture and values of Pakistani society, it will be more appealing to the majority of the people. But if it goes in the existing AM way, it will only have to consist of these specific people and some crowd (tamshbeen) will join AM, not for the sake of women’s rights but to satisfy their sexual needs.” (Religious Leader)

Aspects of Aurat March

Strengths of Aurat March

Aurat March is a volunteer movement, bridging the gap of WAF (women action forum), more vocal and inclusive, engaging young women in the feminist movement, non-funded, raising the issues of common women in their own language, reclaiming public spaces, claiming women agency, generate debate on identity politics, space for women resistance, non-hierarchical, gaining male support, confrontational and initiate public discourse on women rights. All the campaigns are run by volunteers and there is no donor-driven agenda in the Aurat March. Aurat March has strengthened the women's movement in Pakistan by demanding social reforms, challenging patriarchal structures, engaging youth generation in the movement, making the movement more visibility, raising political awareness, more inclusive than WAF, initiating feminist discourse in the public spaces. (Saigol, 2019).

Aurat March is a volunteer movement with a non-hierarchical structure. Being an independent and non-funded movement, Aurat March has the stance to reflect women’s rights violation issues without any influence by the government and the donor agencies. Aurat March saves the feminist movement in Pakistan. As young women are taking part in the movement. The older feminist generation was concerned for second leadership in the women’s movement so the Aurat March provided the forum for the youth to be part of the feminist movement in Pakistan and continue the legacy of the women’s rights struggle in Pakistan. Aurat March is a collective and strengthening forum to raise women’s rights issues. It is more political and resilient than the NGOs work. Also, Aurat March generated a public discourse on women rights issues (public and private).

“The one limitation with the NGOs is that they have to work closely with the government so they cannot be so vocal.” (Organizer)

“Now through the AM younger generation is getting politically involved and bridging the gap between the amazing work done by the previous generation (feminist) and what is needed to do in the coming years.” (Organizer)

“AM provides a political space to the women. We put demands from our side but here women bring their wounds of every type (yahn par aurtein apny zakham lati han aur wo har kism kay hoty han) because here women are always taught to stay quiet in every bad situation as they are said “mar jana, chup rahna.” (Organizer)

According to the religious leaders, there is no positive aspect of Aurat March.

“AM only purpose is to promote vulgarity and live-in relationship, break family the system, to end marriage system. I know many of AM organizers, I met them in TV shows. Most of them are secular and they do not have faith on any religion. Practically they are not modern to that extend which they are pretending on the roads.” (Religious Leader)

Weaknesses of Aurat March

According to the Aurat March organizers, limited outreach, and less mobilization to the rural communities are the weaknesses of Aurat March. Only Hyderabad Aurat Azadi March has reached out to rural areas of Sindh and in the rest of the cities, it is only covering urban localities and communities. Increasing backlash against Aurat March is also a threat to the sustainability of Aurat March. Aurat March is more focused on urban women’s issues.

“We are still not properly reaching out to Urban areas as such. By this time, we can reach out to the rural areas because rural issues are very different than urban issues. As a larger urban movement, if we try to highlight issues of rural areas we could not be able to present their real issues.” (Organizer)

“AM Lahore being not rural, we do not go to rural areas as particularly. We are not saying that those are not important people but Lahore is a big city and we are still not properly reaching out to Urban areas as such.” (Organizer)

On the other side, religious leaders had the opinion that Aurat March is not a movement for Pakistani women’s rights as it failed to reflect women’s issues. Aurat March has destroyed the women’s movement instead to strengthen it. Aurat March is a western idea with a focus to damage the family system, culture, and social norms. The activity of Aurat March is a hub for promoting vulgarity. It is also misleading the people by demanding unnecessary freedom. Aurat March is anti-Islam and anti-state. Along with the immoral demands Aurat March is promoting vulgarity in society. Aurat March lead to cases like *Noor Moqadam* by demanding freedom. Feminism promotes unethical expectations. Aurat March is using the name of women’s rights but does not reflect the issues of working-class women. The organizers and the participant women are being used by some people by promoting their agenda. This movement is not representative of the majority of the state. This is an elite class movement and not impactful on a larger scale.

“AM participants were representing hardly one percent of the society, there was no representation of a larger portion of the society. Also, the resistance from the religious groups decreases the impact of AM.” (Religious Leader)

The case of Noor Mokadam is a result of such AM women who are demanding freedom (Azadi) so such kind of limitless freedom will end up with such kind of cased (aur istaraha ki azadi ka natija tu yahi nikly ga na, madar pidar azadi)“. (Religious Leader)

“I feel sympathies with those women as they have been trapped. These men are giving them the directions in one program AM men were saying we are also women. These men have made some women their slaves and fulfilled their aims through these AM women. These few women (AM) are thinking that they will create an amazing women’s movement”. (Religious Leader)

Impact of Aurat Match

Aurat March in Perspective of Religion

According to the Aurat March Organizers, Aurat March is an inclusive activity for all women with diverse identities. Some radical extremist groups and religious scholars misinterpreted the spirit of Aurat March and labelled it as against religious values. Also, religious extremist groups misuse religion to control women and women’s voices. People use the name of religion to suppress women and their rights. According to the organizers, religious groups played a central role to criticize Aurat March at every level and disseminated wrong interpretations of Aurat March to influence people’s

opinion on it. Aurat March was characterized as against Islam and culture which created a hindrance for many women to participate in it. Religious leaders propagated hatred against Aurat March. Religious groups reported cases against the Aurat March organizers. FIRs were registered on organizers from Islamabad and Hyderabad. Aurat March organizers were threatened by the religious radical groups to be attacked if they will not stop their activities. Religion is used as a tool to suppress the women's movement in Pakistan.

“Many women said to us that we wanted to join but we can't come because people criticized AM by saying that the March is organized by those women who are against the Islam.” (Organizer)

“Last year the Karachi AM was threatening that they will be burnt with acid and in Hyderabad this year Jamat-e- Islami called women to protest on the same venue of AM.” (Organizer)

In the perspective of religious leaders, Aurat March is against Islam, social norms, and against the family system. Islam entitled all rights to women but the way Aurat March is demanding rights is immoral and against Islamic values. Islam put some responsibilities and limits on women but the Aurat March demanded limitless freedom from social and religious responsibilities of women. These women of Aurat March have the agenda to defame Islam.

None of the religious scholars supports Aurat March. We are in favour of women's rights but within the limits of Islam. Aurat March is against Islam and there is no relevance in Aurat March demands and Islamic teachings. Aurat March defames Islam and misinterprets the religious obligations of women. Women have the right to raise their voices to demand the provision of their rights but the way Aurat March reflected women's needs and demands is against Islam and the social values of an Islamic state. Aurat March demanded limitless freedom for women.

AM is not aligned with Islam. Islam put limits on women and impose moral values on women. Aurat March crossed all the limits. Aurat March is strongly criticized by religious scholars and religious groups because of its presentation. The religious people raised their voices and demanded a March against the Aurat March to discourage the Aurat March mandate. Haya March was held in reaction to Aurat March in which women's religious duties and responsibilities were highlighted by religious women.

AM was against our social life. AM was totally against our culture. Islam is too far, there is no comparison of AM with Islamic teachings for women.” (Religious Leader)

“We believed that there is no harm to protesting but when someone crosses the limits of Islam and rebel from the love relationships of father and brother. So it is not possible that these women can achieve their goals while living in the circle of Islam. These women have crossed the limits of Islam.” (Religious Leader)

“AM is defaming Islam. Women's rights in Islam are equal for men and women. Islam gave freedom of expression, freedom of marriage, and all human rights to women”. (Religious Leader)

“There is no relevance of AM with Islamic teachings. Every society has moral ethics and responsibilities for every citizen. Every relationship has allegations. Religion and society impose responsibilities on every citizen. The concept of AM is wrong.” (Religious Leader)

In the opinion of another religious leader, the religious people raised their voices and demanded a March against the Aurat March to discourage the Aurat March mandate. Haya March was held in reaction to Aurat March in which women's religious duties and responsibilities were highlighted by religious women. In 2019, Jamia Hafsa students held a Haya March in Islamabad (Batool & Malik, 2021). Hayya March was created solely to combat the agency's subversion in the shape of the Aurat March (Afzal, Pakri & Abdullah, 2021). Now every year religious groups hold Haya March in different cities.

“All the religious women in Pakistan asked us to make another March again this AM. After AM, we initiated a very successful movement (online & offline) to create awareness among women about their responsibilities. Also in response to feminism, we started a movement named “familyism”. We focused on the importance of family that how a peaceful home source of happiness. Our slogans were “aurat moashry ki mamar ha”. (Religious Leader)

Aurat March in Perspective of Women’s Movement

In view of Aurat March Organizers, Aurat March has strengthened the women’s movement in Pakistan by demanding social norms, challenging patriarchal structures, engaging young generation in the movement, making movement more visible, raising political awareness and being more inclusive than the previous feminist movement (WAF). Aurat March develops a narrative to challenge the patriarchal system and socio-political and economic reforms. Aurat March is also taking forward the agenda of the women’s movement in the new era. In the past, WAF was more focused on legislation and political reforms but the contemporary feminist movement is focusing on challenging the social structures. WAF members avoided public discussions on the body and sexuality (Saigol, 2019). Aurat March proved to be challenging to the patriarchal structures and created a debate on gender politics in society. (Afzal, Pakri & Abdullah, 2021). Women’s movement gains more visibility due to the Aurat March. Youth engagement in the movement is also a significant contribution of Aurat March toward the women’s movement in the country. (Saigol & Chaudhary, 2020). Aurat March has provided an avenue and trained people to challenge and narratives against women.

“AM makes the women’s movement visible and makes some political parties aware to include women in their manifesto. At least social media Twitter and Facebook people are raising voices for the better state of women’s rights.” (Organizers)

In the dissimilar, the religious leaders had the opinion that Aurat March is destroying the respectable status of women in society by promoting vulgar demands. Aurat March is led by bad women and following wrong activities in the name of liberation. It is disrespecting the family system and leads to a decrease in women’s protection system in the family. Aurat March is a meaningless and immoral activity. Aurat March in Pakistan is proof of vulgarization with the western supremacy agenda (Ali, Cheema & Dang, 2020). The demonstration reflected an image that sexual freedom is demanded by the contemporary elite class women in Pakistan following the footprints of western women. (Nasir, Riaz & Mirza, 2021).

“There are a bunch of bad women. They do not have any religious facts. They all are over actors. They get some funding from the countries to hold such kinds of events. They are being used by external people because they do not have any own faith.” (Religious leader)

CONCLUSION

Aurat March is a volunteer and non-hierarchical movement that was started to mark international women’s day, initiated by young feminists. Aurat March was aimed to raise awareness of women’s sufferings and reclaim their rights in private and public life. The Aurat March fills the gap between contemporary Pakistani women issues with more inclusion and engaging youth. The march has demanded social reforms and challenging patriarchal structures. Posters of Aurat March were controversial and under debate in online and offline spaces because the language was straightforward, witty, funny, sarcastic and vocal ways to represent their issues instead of low tones and submissive words. Aurat March was labelled as a western agenda, immoral demands and elite class movement. Opponents claim that Aurat March is a western conspiracy with the aim to destroy the social, cultural, and religious values of an Islamic society. Criticism against the Aurat March was due to extremist views of opinion leaders, patriarchal social structure and social media hype. In Pakistan, the general perception of the feminist movement is as western influence activity of elite-class women. Patriarchal systems operate by oppressing one gender to establish the superiority of the other.

From the perspective of religious leaders, Aurat March is a funded activity and Western-influenced. The raised issues and way of protest were not within the Islamic beliefs and practices. Posters were shameless, against society’s values and anti-religion. *Jamat-e-Islami*, organized *Hayya*

March and rolled out to condemn Aurat March by highlighting women's duties and responsibilities in Islam. Religious leaders had the opinion that posters were against Islam and the family system. In Pakistan, the use of liberal sexual attitudes and language is considered as a hazard towards religious, social and moral values. Aurat March was denounced because of the slogans that were about sexualize women and women's bodies and openly challenging Islamic values and social morals. In views of the religious leaders the raised issues were not aligned with the socio-cultural and religious values of the Pakistani society. The language used in slogans of Aurat March Pakistan manipulated for contaminating the divine Islamic ideology of Pakistani Muslim society.

The study concluded that Aurat March organizers believed that women are discriminated from home to society and state level. Women identity is not recognized and women are exploited in terms of body rights to economic rights. Patriarchal social structure is implying the name of religion to maintain women's suppression in society. For the religious leaders, the perception of women's rights for Aurat March organizers' are immoral and anti-Islamic with influence to promote western culture in Pakistan.

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Acronyms: WAF (women action forum), AM (Aurat March), NGOs (Non-Government Organization).