

## MEN'S ENGAGEMENT WITH FEMINIST MOVEMENT: AURAT MARCH AND GENDER JUSTICE IN PAKISTAN

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### ABSTRACT

*This article aims to explore and analyze men's engagement with feminist struggles in Pakistan, especially in Aurat March since 2018. Based on participant observations and semi-structured interviews conducted with men/boys who have participated in Aurat March, this article attempted to understand men's participation in social movements like Aurat March. It is reflected in the study that men who have been engaged with feminism and feminist struggles in Pakistan can not only relate to feminism or gender justice but also problematized issues like patriarchy and violence against women. For these men, such movements aiming for gender justice are not only women-centric rather are beneficial for the whole society. According to the respondents the Aurat March, as a gender transformative movement, has the potential to bring diverse groups together for the cause of women and gender rights. Men who have been actively participating in Aurat March have conceptualized feminism, problematized patriarchy, identified challenges faced by women, and necessitated more men to ally with such movements. This study also reflected a significant aspect that not all men are the same or relate to hegemonic forms of masculinity; rather some men resist those gender-oppressive ideologies and structures that are detrimental to the progress of society.*

**Keywords:** Feminisms, Aurat March (AM), Men and Masculinity, Gender Justice, patriarchy

### Circulating self (*continuous...*)

My living space is a smaller square  
within the larger square.  
I am circulating within the smaller square.  
I can see the larger square  
that has small outlets within each of its sides.  
I circulate within my smaller square  
that is being surrounded by that larger square  
that has small outlets within each of its sides.  
I can see men living within each outlet of the larger square  
through my circulation in the smaller square of mine  
I can see that one by one  
within those small outlets of the larger square  
I find my smaller square surrounded by that larger square  
Where all the men are living  
of each form, each kind, every shape  
I can see them  
because I am in my smaller square  
I am circulating within my smaller square  
which is being placed in that larger square  
which has small outlets within each of its sides  
I can see different men, men doing differently within each outlet of that larger square  
They will never see outside toward me  
because I am circulating every second

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within my smaller square  
 not stopping in front of any of the outlets of that larger square  
 where men of every form, every kind, every shape are living  
 I can see the differences  
 It is me who is circulating within my smaller square  
 that is being surrounded by that larger square  
 which has small outlets on each of its sides.  
 but I can never be in the small outlets of the larger square  
 I will always be in my smaller square  
 always circulating  
 always seeing  
 always moving  
 within my smaller square  
 surrounded by that larger square  
 which has small outlets where all men of the society reside.  
 (Author, 2017)

## INTRODUCTION

In 2019, Pakistan Arts Council Karachi announced a talk “Feminism: The Other perspective”. This talk had panelists (speakers) who were selected from different walks of life to share their perspectives (s) on feminism. A huge backlash was hurdled against this event (mostly on social media), surprisingly by feminists/women, not on the event (obviously) but rather on the constitution of the panel. It was an “*all men panel*” who were invited to speak on feminism. Much of the criticism came from feminists who thought this event was another indication of “*mansplaining*”. An Irony- those men who intrinsically and existentially have the privilege (male dominance especially in the patriarchal system) will speak on this issue. Twitter space was flooded with the Twitter handle “manel” to illustrate how problematic this whole idea was. One of the criticisms on Twitter space read as;

These men wanna give the 'other perspective' on feminism. Maybe the intention here was to use their privilege for the cause - but this isn't how allyship works. This is, however, what taking up space looks like. It is also what men exploiting feminism to build capital looks like (Aiman Rizvi). Another tweet not only questioned the celebration of International Women's Day (IWD) but also reflected a deep suspicion of the men who have agreed to be part of this panel. Should we just call it men's day and why are all these men agreeing to participate? (Atiya)

While the organizers of the event tried to justify their stance that they named this event as “the other perspective” because they wanted to “register the perception” of these men “they were in a position to influence public opinion.” However, this justification fell on deaf ears and the amount of backlash and outrage on social media resulted in the change of title and (re)constitution of the panel. The event was renamed “Understanding feminism” with the “addition” of two women panelists. Jibran Nasir, Human rights activist, and one of the male panelists, had already shared his apprehensions as he had found the original title *misleading*. “*I was informed the panel is about men talking to other men about rethinking masculinity and why as men we need feminism. It wasn't to explain feminism or talk about women's issues as men*”, He twitted.

For me, this whole incident was indicative of many interesting aspects. First and foremost it raised the question that what is the possibility of men participating in and championing the feminist cause in Pakistan. Similarly, is feminist praxis inherently linked with women's agency only? It also pointed out the “territorial imperative” feminist women would have for the space they have created/carved for themselves through a struggle of decades. It also reflected that internal diversity of feminist thought and action could consequent in varying responses on the question of men and their engagement with ideas of feminism. Especially through the radical strand of feminism, men constitute and sustain (as an individual and as a group) the structures of gender oppression until and unless they start questioning their male privilege. Therefore the skepticism feminists have shown on this incident is part of a historical process in that women must struggle for the transformation of society relying on their agency (as actors of change and transformation).

Against this background, the present research was carried out to explore and analyze men's engagement with *Aurat March* in Pakistan since 2018. To understand the experiences of men who support women's rights within a feminist framework this research revolved around these questions: Why men have engaged with (participated in) *Aurat March*? In what ways their engagement has informed their subjectivities related to feminism? It was also aimed to explore how they imagined their "manhood" or "masculinity" within the patriarchal system? Since all men are not the same and certainly have different opinions related to gender justice, this research was also intended to explore how men reject and resist patriarchal structures through participating in movements like *Aurat March*. Moreover, how through their sustained participation in this movement they have worked around the idea of male privilege and if they have become more gender-sensitive or not? Lastly, the aim was to document the voices of these men who exhibit a different kind of masculinity through their participation, support, and concern for women and gender rights in Pakistan.

I foreground this research in my own experience of gender and feminism. I remember the seminal work of bell hooks' *feminism is for everyone* (2000) was my first introduction to the world of feminism (at least academically) back in 2015. This intriguing title captured my attention like no other text on feminism did. How the idea of *feminists are made not born* through the cultivation of *feminist consciousness* can bring all genders together for the struggle for gender justice- a form of politics in her words is *passionate politics* was fascinating for me. I came to know about feminism through feminists like bell hooks, Patricia Collins, Angela Davis, Nivedita Menon, Kamla Bhasin, Farzana Bari, and all those women around who have believed in and fought for the feminist cause through and through.

I see my engagement with feminism as rooted in sameness- the idea that women are subjugated (by patriarchy constituted by men and supported by men and women alike) and marginalized; I too have experienced discrimination as I did not comply with the hegemonic masculine archetype of the society. Identifying power differential as a mode of gender construction helped me to understand my experience of subjugation and marginalization regarding other "men". I felt and lived a life of a *man* (though I always have questioned myself am I a 'true/pure/normal' man) who is different from other *men* (at least this is how I can analyze and recognize my identity since my engagement with feminism). My sense of being 'different' is not rooted in my sex or gender per se rather it is rooted in the idea of this ideal manhood or masculinity (hegemonic transpiring toxicity) constructed and imagined by the society in which I live (highly patriarchal). My sense of difference stems from this recognition that the presence of power within/among men differentiates and places some men above other men (hierarchical) as classified and theorized by R W Connell (1995) in her seminal work on masculinities.

### **Background**

When I started participating in *Aurat March* I recalled what Aasim Sajjad (2019) pointed out in his article that perhaps "*men do not own feminist struggles.*" More than an allegation he analyzed the way men have been socialized in societies that any resistance to male domination or supremacy (by women) is considered a potential threat to men. My participation in *Aurat March* has provided me on various occasions to introspect and question how I can work around/give up my "male privilege" and how I can contribute to dismantling the system of gender oppression i.e. patriarchy. It was more than an afterthought rather became a persistent fact that to achieve gender just society men also need to reflect on their positions.

Though *Aurat March* (termed as the fourth wave of feminism in Pakistan- Saigol and Chaudhary 2020) has emerged fairly recently on the political landscape as a protest/resistance movement, it has garnered not only much public attention but also a lot of academic discussions. Started in 2018 the genesis of *Aurat March* was the day of celebration of International Women's day (IWD) on 8 March by young feminists in Karachi. It was aimed to celebrate International Women's day while protesting against the oppression, discrimination, and marginalization experienced by individuals (especially women) due to their defined gender roles/positions in society. It emerged what (Khan. et al., 2021) termed a "*public expression of anger at misogyny, patriarchal practices, and pervasive gender inequality*" (Khan et al., 2021, p. 398).

Reflecting on history it is evident that the *Aurat March* is a continuation (yet strikingly different in myriad ways) of the feminist struggle that spawned over decades in Pakistan. Scholars like Farida Shaheed & Khawar Mumtaz (1987), Afiya Zia (2019), Rubina Saigol (2016a, 2020b), Fouzia Saeed (2020), Ayesha Khan (2019), (mostly feminists) have extensively documented the feminist movement (including WAF i.e. Women Action Forum) in Pakistan. It would be best to analyze the emergence of

*Aurat March* in the context of the feminist movement as reflected by Shama Dossa (2022) in her recent analysis of *Aurat March*. She has captured the essence of the *March* in these words;

I argue that the AM is symbolic of a brave space (Arao and Clemens 2013) a reflective transformative space, a space for community organizing, an online-offline hybrid space, an inclusive space for solidarity, a space for enacting feminist pedagogy and theorizing, a hopeful space in a context where civil society voices are being silenced and activists are being murdered and disappearing. I argue that the AM signals intersectional, interfaith, and intergenerational feminism, building on the work of existing women's movements in Pakistan. These emerging feminisms are public, private, political, and Pakistani and point to new feminisms which are outspoken, and expansive in their inclusion of sexualities and the domestic sphere in a way that is unprecedented (p. 333).

Since its inception, *Aurat March* has broached those issues and questions related to women that were largely absent from the public discourse in Pakistan. Debates around women's access to public spaces, bodily rights, and freedom from sexual oppression/exploitation were at the centre of this movement since the beginning. As observed by Saigol and Chaudhary (2020), "*on the one hand, the new feminists reject the traditional norms of the private sphere, on the other, they seek to reclaim their spaces in the public one*" (p. 9). Over a period of time, *Aurat March* focused on gender justice for all gender/sexually oppressed groups in Pakistan that showed the intersectional and inclusive element of this social movement.

Another interesting aspect that distinguished *Aurat March* from its predecessors is the level of the backlash it has received. As anticipated by most of the organizers and participants of the *Aurat March* the backlash "*revealed the sinister palate of Pakistani patriarchy that comprises the collusion of men, military, and Mulla (clerics) politics in the Islamic Republic*" (Zia, 2022). According to feminist scholars like Afiya Zia, the backlash revealed the pervasiveness of patriarchy in our society. This present research, therefore, aimed to highlight those men who have decided to participate in feminist struggles in Pakistan that aimed to dismantle this gender-oppressive structure. Documenting their voices, this research has furnished men's engagement with feminism and feminist movements in Pakistan.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

It is a well-documented fact that men have been engaged with feminist movements across the globe in various capacities. Scholars like Kimmel (1987a, 2011b, & 2012c) have extensively worked on men's engagement with feminism in the west, especially in the U.S. His work pointed out how and in what ways men have benefited from the feminist consciousness they gained from such engagements. Also, it is evident that in the last few decades there is a substantial increase in the number of men participating in feminist struggles (Peretz, 2017). What is interesting to highlight is that there is a growing awareness and consciousness among men to support feminism for a shared better future. As famously put by bell hooks, "*the change of hearts and minds*" of not only women but also of individual men are equally/extremely significant for the attainment of gender just society.

During the 1970s with the second wave of feminism and radical feminist uprisings, the issue of men became more central. Theorizing patriarchy to understanding women's oppression through sexual politics, all pointed out how men (as a group) have been privileged historically. This resulted in a reaction from the men of the society in distinct ways: First men became aware of their privilege and started questioning their role and position in constituting and maintaining patriarchy. This first group was called pro-feminist individuals. Second, a reactionary force started against feminism in general and radical feminism in particular that aimed to restore gender justice by bringing men's questions in. Collectively called men's rights groups these men shared their unease with feminists' problematizing of men.

What is interesting to highlight here is that the men's rights groups eventually gave rise to ideologies that were misogynistic and hence created more mistrust among the feminist circles. This gave rise to suspicion shown by feminists towards men who were eager to join the feminist cause. As articulated by Chowdhury and Basit (2017), "*The male feminist is either an accomplished ally or simply a wolf in sheep's clothing. What is sorely missed in these popular pieces are the processes, conditions, motivations, triumphs, and failures of becoming male feminists*" (p. 1). They have pointed out in their work on India that also aimed this research to go beyond these misunderstandings and suspicions.

There is not much literature produced in the context of Pakistan that explored how men have been involved (historically and contemporary) in the women's rights struggle especially in feminist endeavors. Women and gender rights issues have mostly been conceptualized as *women-only* issues, hence focusing on (almost) women's lives and works. While historically there have been individual men (gender sensitive and progressive) who in varying capacities and roles championed the progressive cause in Pakistan including women and gender rights, their presence remained minimal. There has been no academic work produced that has documented their presence, role, and participation in women and gender rights movements in Pakistan. Therefore the present research is aimed to fill this gap that why, how, and in what ways men have been engaged with the feminist struggle in Pakistan, especially with *Aurat* March since 2018.

## **METHODOLOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS**

Working from within a feminist research framework, this study is qualitative in nature. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with men/boys who have been participating in *Aurat* March since 2018. These individuals were of varying ages and diverse backgrounds. These interviews were the continuation of the discussions we used to have over the issues of women and gender pre, during, and post-*Aurat* March every year.

This research focuses on the perspectives of these men who have been part of this resistance movement and their opinions might not get reflected (faded away) otherwise. I by no means aimed at (re)centering the debate on men within feminism and am cognizant of the apprehensions feminists (might) would have in documenting *only* the men's perspective(s). I however strongly feel that what inclusion in a social movement (feminist/*Aurat* March) demands is to capture the voices of all those who are part of these movements for a shared vision of the future. This is a process of documenting diverse voices/narratives and generating a conversation among various groups. Since these respondents have participated in *Aurat* March I also reflected on the question that what kept these men motivated/committed and compelled/moved them to participate in such social movements that aimed for women/gender rights. Along with the interviews that I have conducted with the participants, I also have relied on the field notes and participant observation of *Aurat* March.

## **DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS**

Over the past few years, I have met with individuals from different walks of life participating in *Aurat* March. They represent the diverse social strata of society. Their perceptions, motivations, and attachments with the feminist (gender) cause reflected a broad spectrum of possibilities. While each individual has a different story to tell, perhaps a different reason for being a part of this movement, what binds them all is the element of solidarity, ally-ship, and empathy. Needless to say, they all have been deeply impacted by the problematic gender norms of society in one way or other. What remained the most appealing aspect of this research was also to document the perceptions, ideas, narratives, and opinions of men who have been participating in *Aurat* March related to feminism in particular.

### **1. Conceptualizing Feminism: *Engagement with the Ideology***

Surprisingly most of the men I have interviewed or conversed with had a clear/distinct understanding of feminism. Those who even had some misconceptions about the feminist movement came to know firsthand about it when they participated in AM. What also was reflected in most of the responses was that these men have started to conceptualize feminism and gender justice with even more clarity through engagement with the feminist movement. One of the respondents, a 40 years old man who has been participating in the *Aurat* March for the last two years, shared his opinion in these words;

I am not a specialist. I am someone based on my broad general knowledge of these subjects understand feminism to be a broad body of knowledge and a body of practice of women but also all sorts of people: men, women, increasingly people with different sexualities, different genders, trans people, who understand that the world- most of our human existence- but the modern world at the very least, has been deeply structured and mediated by male privilege and male dominance and that is understood as structural oppression that is known as patriarchy.

His response was telling in so many different ways. While he considered himself not a specialist in the subject he reflected on his personal experience. Importantly he was able to speak about male privilege and dominance as contributing factors to gender injustice in Pakistan. For him, these ideas are

entrenched in society and also perpetuated by the state through its institutions. He also was able to imagine feminism as a movement for everyone especially gender and sexually oppressed groups alike.

When I approached a young participant of the March, a man in his early 30's, a university student from Islamabad, who also has been part of the volunteer committee of the *Aurat March*, with the same question he was excited to share his understanding of feminism as; "*For me, feminism is both a theory and also a practice that seeks to emancipate not only women and girls, but all oppressed genders, and in some ways men too from their own deeply imbued patriarchal norms which make many men quite unhappy and unfulfilled*".

What was reflected in his response was also instructive to highlight here. Since he was also participating in feminist reading circles, and events and also volunteered for the March, I could sense he was well-informed and sensitized to the issues of gender and women. For him his participation in *Aurat March* compelled him to be more critical of his role as a man in society. He stressed how patriarchal norms have impacted men around us and added; "*This oppressive system makes them a repository of rage and ego which is manifested ultimately in some forms of violence that are visited upon women. That repressed rage of men becomes something that most women and girls have to deal with*".

Since *Aurat March* aimed to achieve gender justice for all gender(s) and sexually oppressed groups in society, I also happened to meet a few men who were queer and were sloganeering against the hetero-normative patriarchal system. A boy from generation Z told me that he is part of *Aurat March* since he has experienced discrimination and violence due to his identity. Reflecting on his experience he said, "*I see feminism as a deeply emancipatory idea or at least the promise or potential of an idea that seeks to liberate all of humankind, not just women and girls or oppressed genders but also in some ways, in a very Freirean way, the oppressor himself*".

His idea of emancipation or liberation of all oppressed groups (due to their gender and sexual identity) is embedded in the vision of *Aurat March*. Though he was not well aware of the genesis of the feminist movement in Pakistan, he kept on repeating the idea that the element of inclusion is the most distinguishing feature of this movement that was not there in the past. Many scholars who have analyzed *Aurat March* also opined that intersectionality and inclusion are distinguishing aspects of *Aurat March*.

## **2. Problematizing Patriarchy: Engagement with the Structure**

The feminist movement in Pakistan though had many strands of feminism, yet it aimed for the collective struggle against gender-based discrimination, oppression, and marginalization. For scholars like Saigol (2016) the feminist movement in Pakistan has been shaped historically by national and international power configurations and hence the strategies adopted by the feminist also changed significantly. What distinguishes *Aurat March* from its predecessors is the extent to which it problematized and challenged the patriarchal system of society and broached issues like women's access to public spaces, bodily rights, and sexual autonomy, and freedom from oppression violence.

For most of the men I have interacted, feminism is a political movement that is aimed at gender justice in Pakistan. *Aurat March* has categorically stated that this social movement is to end the patriarchal structure that is detrimental to both women and men. Many feminists and women activists of the *March* have displayed their anger towards patriarchy rather than *men*. For the men must stand with them to dismantle this system of oppression. The manifesto of *Aurat March* 2020 stated: "*Aurat March is a collective of feminist women, gender and sexual minorities who stand against patriarchal structures that result in sexual, economic and structural exploitation of women*".

Interestingly the men I interviewed in *Aurat March* have been able to problematize patriarchy as an exploitative system for themselves. In their opinion feminism and women's struggle that aimed to dismantle this structure of oppression are crucial to attaining gender justice for all. One of the respondents observed that "*patriarchy is a structure that oppressed all those (especially and mostly women) who refuse to participate in constituting or maintaining it*". He also believed that this system though constituted by and large by men, there are also a growing number of individual men who are standing against this structure.

Another respondent, who was a university professor, expressed his views, "*Ours is a deeply patriarchal society and has become even more so since the 1980s, institutionally and through laws and through everyday practice which is institutionalized or enforced by the state or by elements within*

*society that were patronized by the state*". He was cognizant of the fact that though discrimination between genders exists as a universal reality, in Pakistan male dominance is pervasive. Referring to women's free access to public spaces he maintained that, "women even in this present age are still not fully free and comfortable in occupying public spaces. Harassment, abuse, and exploitation of women are almost a norm in our public spaces. If we want to change the structure, we first need to make sure that girls and women can access all public spaces independently".

Aurat March has also faced a huge backlash since 2018 that demonstrated that any form of resistance to this system of gender oppression (i.e. patriarchy) would immediately be perceived as a threat to the whole society. It also pointed out the fact that the patriarchal system, to function, required constant power (in most cases backed by violence). While male dominance is a feature of this system and it would benefit men as a group, by no mean it would ensure that individual men would also get the benefits in the same way.

Those individual men who do not benefit from this system of oppression preferably join women and other gender-oppressed groups for the cause of gender justice. One of the participants of Aurat March shared his experience in these words;

For me, Aurat March represents a movement that challenged the patriarchal structure of our society. Participating in this movement also made me question my role or position in this system and I realized that I have never been able to relate to hegemonic forms of masculinity that legitimize patriarchy. I can see now more distinctively how the patriarchal system oppresses women and those men who would not comply with it.

### **3. Forging Alliance and Support: Engagement with the Cause**

As discussed above Aurat March has taken up those issues that were largely absent from the public discourse. While interacting with the respondents on alliance building and support for the cause it was discussed what are some of the issues men perceive as most pressing from women in Pakistan. Alliance, solidarity, and support also demanded that not only feminists welcome men who participated but men must realize their privilege. As one of the respondents told me;

If the Aurat March is run almost entirely by women and there's this resistance to men (in general), then of course it will be difficult, or vice versa. If men say oh this is a women's only struggle we will only stand aside and support it, then it will never change. So this is also part of what hopefully will evolve on both sides of that story. He further added;

Obviously, there are some things that men cannot do. Like if you go to places where you are organizing women in particular and women can't get involved or don't want to be involved with their men around then you are conscious of that. Aside from those sensitivities or those places where strategically you have to adopt certain women-only approaches, they can do anything. I don't see any bar on what men may or may not do. Whether they do it or not is a function of other factors.

It is interesting to highlight that he mentioned that men's engagement with the Aurat March should be taken as an alliance. Men should not strive to take the space rather they trust women in organizing and leading the movement. Men must learn to walk in the lead of women and through this way they would be able to question their privilege. Most of the respondents on challenges faced by women in contemporary Pakistan shared that, "occupying and access to public spaces remained the fundamental problem women faced".

Another respondent expressed that it would be better that we listen to feminists to what they want to attain rather than suggest what we want to achieve. However, he opined that, "In my opinion and experience feminists now want to access to public spaces, they want to end violence against women, especially in domestic spaces and also on online spaces, they want to end discriminatory laws that impede women's life choices and finally they want to have more bodily autonomy and sexual/reproductive rights".

Most of the respondents were not only aware of the demands of the Aurat March but also showed solidarity with the cause of gender justice in Pakistan. For all of them, they believed that they stand with women and their demands that are presented in the form of manifesto of these movements. As reflected in all of their responses that they participated in the Aurat March to unconditionally support the cause of women's rights and gender justice that would eventually benefit all gender(s).

#### 4. Contextualizing the Struggle: *Engagement with the Movement(s)*

The interaction with participants of *the Aurat March* also brought the question of the future of such struggles in Pakistan and the role of men in these movements. Most of the respondents were optimistic and shared their vision of a gender-just society. Moreover, all of them have expressed the significance of more men participating in the *Aurat March* for a better-shared future for all.

They believed that such movements not only benefit women and other gender-oppressed groups but also men in multiple ways. Some participants believed that it will take a while before more men will start owing this struggle as their own and for that, a constant reminder must be given all the time that such struggles are not only for a particular gender but rather have transformative potential for the entire society. On this question of what the future holds for this struggle, one of the respondents, an old retired man shared his apprehension in these words;

If someone says to you that everything will happen smoothly, when it does not happen- there is disappointment. There has to be a balance of zest and idealism with an understanding of where analytically the world stands today. The fact that you don't have a magic wand and you can't just use a word and say that this will happen. You have to be very conscious of the analytical demands of the present which is to think more carefully about what the younger generations are trying to build.

Men's socialization was one key issue that remained central to the issue of men's participation in *Aurat March*. The process of socialization carves out a specific form of masculine self (mostly hegemonic) for men that is essentially problematic. Most of the respondents pointed out that to engage more men in gender-based movements, critical reflection on this process of socialization is inevitable. According to one respondent vast majority of men and boys are brought up (not only within homes but also in wider society) with a scripted idea of "*what it means to be a boy or a man, or to grow up and to be the bread earner, and to be strong and other norms attached to it*". Another man who was in his late 40's (single parent) shared his opinion on this as;

It will take a long time to create a critical mass of men who stand up for these ideas. I brought up my child after getting divorced, and my son lived with me for many years on his own. I often felt like men would make fun of me like you are a man and you are raising a child. Even things like that are very difficult to make go away. It happens all over the world but much more so here.

What was most interesting in his long response was that he was not only conscious of his role/position as a male but also shared the challenges he had in his life. He further shared;

In other countries, being a man and a caregiver or a homemaker is not so outrageous and unheard of. Here a very small percentage of men would do this or would make that choice. Most people would do it because they have to do it. But to make that choice willingly is rare. That will take time. These are political and life choices that men make. They choose to recognize their privilege or not. They choose to live life differently or not.

Again he pointed out another key aspect of how men tend to overlook their privilege and assume that these roles and positions are "given/natural" and are meant to be observed. However, the element of choice, as mentioned by him, when exercised consciously can make a substantial difference within society. A young boy who was participating in the *Aurat March* for the first time mentioned how through social media he was able to engage with the debates around feminism and the women's movement in Pakistan. Reflecting on the significance of social media he said that as the "*debate expands on social media there are more young men like me who have started questioning their preconceived ideas about these matters*". All of these above responses demonstrate the significance of men's engagement in *Aurat March*.

#### CONCLUSION

While *Aurat March* since 2018 faced huge backlash (mostly from men as usual) it also garnered a new kind/wave of right-wing activism against gender justice (feminist movement-*Aurat March*) in Pakistan. Now the International day for women's Rights (8<sup>th</sup> March) is celebrated by the populist right-wing political parties (Islamists) as a reactionary force against *Aurat March*. What is termed as *HayaMarch* (*ModestyMarch*) has not only emerged as an antidote to feminist struggle it also morphed into a violent reactionary outfit inciting violence and abuse. Entirely led by "men" (read-pious) the *HayaMarch* aimed



to claim the space for women framed within the Islamic/cultural context. The patriarchal outlook (and texture) of this *HayaMarch* is equally supported by women of these parties who seek their agency (via their men) and have given up their "space and voice" (veiled bodies-veiled selves).

The emergence of *HayaMarch* is reminiscent of the troubled history feminism has with religious right groups in Pakistan. Naming their (counter)-protest as *Haya March* is also demonstrative of the fact that feminism (*Aurat March*) is considered against the culture, values, and religious sentiments of the society. While many founding members (and later on the participants and allies) of WAF have categorically decided that their struggle for women's (gender) rights would be staged/played out within a secular framework, AM continued with the same motivations and aspirations.

I recall when Patricia Collin Hills conceptualized the idea of intersecting solidarities and democratic possibilities for gender justice, she emphasized the need of building alliances with individuals who have been oppressed differently by the same exploitative system across nations and societies. The same reality reiterated by Aasim Sajjad Akhtar in envisioning the revolutionary horizons in Pakistan as;

Finally, there is this task of pushing back against the tautological notion that only women can be feminists. Of all the drawn-out and fraught struggles that constitute the revolutionary horizon of the classless subject, the challenge of men and boys imbibing feminist politics is arguably the most significant...to embody a revolutionary horizon that transcends patriarchal domination, the classless subject must commit to weaning out the 'toxic masculinity' inculcated in the vast majority of men and boys in Pakistani society (2022, p. 125).

What is also reflected in this research is the possibility of building alliances, cultivating inclusivity, imagining shared futures, and struggling for those "revolutionary horizons" that would mark the beginning of a gender-just society. I would like to conclude by citing an optimistic individual I met in the *March* last year. His words radiate the possibility of the change mentioned above;

The last thing is that it involves just men making some very clear political choices at the level of their personal lives. Personal is politics, men have to do it. That's part of it. Let women lead the revolution. We take care of the kids. I don't think that's a bad deal. I don't think it has to be black or white. So there are many ways that we have to think about struggle. And stop fighting amongst ourselves and start thinking more carefully about not what we are against but what we want to build because it is easy to say we are against this but what we have to build is something that we still don't have an adequate picture of. We can only do that collectively and we do that first and foremost by doing it in practice in our lives. If we do all of these things we have a chance. Otherwise, hate wins.

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