

Understanding the Aurat March Slogans: Insights from Organizers and Opinion Leaders

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Since its initiation in 2018, the Aurat March has emerged as a symbol of the contemporary women's rights movement in Pakistan. Though it provides women with a platform to freely express themselves and assert their rights, it is often misinterpreted as a foreign agenda which antithetical to cultural norms and religious values. This has led to severe online backlash and, often violent, resistance in offline spaces. The current study focused on the perspective of the Aurat March organizers and opinion leaders regarding Aurat March's agenda and the reasons for its criticism. The semi structured in-depth interviews were conducted to gain insights of different experts. It was concluded that the Aurat March is a peaceful procession focused on women's rights and related issues. Hyper-focus on the literal meaning of slogans, rather than subjectivity of the raised issues, results in misinterpretation of women's struggle and leads to a backlash against the Aurat March.

Keywords: *Women's Movement, Aurat March, Women's Rights, Women's Resistance*

INTRODUCTION

Women's movements have evolved across the world to confront social, economic, political, and cultural disparities and challenge inequalities against women's marginalization in society. Though the demands of feminist struggles varied in every epoch, they have always challenged the status quo which earned them violent resistance from established social structures. The women's rights movement emerged as an apolitical struggle for rights in the nascent state and turned political only after the Hudood Ordinance in 1979. Initially, focused on legal and political reforms, the women's rights movement has evolved into a demand for societal restructuring.

Women's rights struggle was initiated with Fatima Jinnah's contribution to the independence movement with the socio-political uplift of women through initiatives such as Ra'ana Liaquat's establishment of APWA (All Pakistan Women's Association). It proved to be a ray of hope due to Zulfiqar Ali's liberal outlook toward women's empowerment and protection of women's rights through the Constitution of 1973 (Ain, 2016). The women-led movements in Pakistan were apolitical before the *Hudood* Ordinance in 1979 with their work focusing primarily on social welfare, catering to the needs of society's vulnerable communities, especially women and children (Imran & Munir, 2018). Khan and Kirmani (2018) stated that Islamization was a contributing factor to women's resistance against discriminatory laws which provided an impetus to the

Understanding the Aurat March Slogans

contemporary women's movement. During that period, several feminists published works in support of women's equal rights and against the militarization of laws. They also narrated that military and religious group interventions were the major contributory factors that oppressed women's rights through regressive laws.

Khan and Kirmani (2018) argued, that women were standing up against abusive powers and taking part in aggregate collective without tolerating any strain that legitimizes repression or outlines their raised demands. The state and society were criticizing women's rights activists for their resistance to discrimination and exploitation. For the last three years, *Aurat March* has been organized by women's rights activists in five cities of Pakistan (Lahore, Karachi, Hyderabad, Quetta, and Islamabad) to raise the voices of Pakistani women against patriarchy and its ramifications for gender minorities. The Aurat March received strong criticisms from larger masses in March 2019 and backlash continues to this day. As women continue to confront the status quo, their peaceful marches are met with resistance from various religious groups. Shah (2014) argues that a systemic overhaul and holistic reforms are required for the realization of gender equality in Pakistan. Feminists contend that women's needs vary with their socio-cultural contexts and unique lived experiences, hence the goals of feminist struggles differ with regions. The Western feminist agenda doesn't align with the needs of Muslim women (Weiss, 2012). Class, culture, and religion are of paramount importance when devising

Batool & Saeed

strategies for women's empowerment. 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 (Ain, 2016).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Aurat March was initiated in 2018 by feminist groups across Pakistan to celebrate International Women's Day (Khan & et al.,2020). It is a platform to deconstruct patriarchy and capitalism by calling for a redistribution of resources among genders and challenging the oppression of the poor. Instead of focusing on individual issues, it adopts a holistic approach striving to ameliorate social problems and gender inequality (Khushbakht & Sultana, 2020). Cultural restructuring is aimed at ending racism, sexism, sexual slavery, oppression, repression, regression, and male domination (Mukhtar & Mukhtar, 2022). The contemporary feminist movement dismantled the illusory dichotomies of the public/private, productive/reproductive, and personal/political realms by reclaiming public places and bringing the personal into the heart of the political. This has earned considerable criticism and opposition from orthodox religious and political factions of the society who consider the issues raised in the March a contravention of Islamic values meant to propagate a Western agenda (Ali, Cheema & Dang, 2020; Saeed & Batool, 2021).

The recent feminist movement has made considerable use of digital platforms for mobilization and outreach, culminating in two instant success diverse and

Understanding the Aurat March Slogans

inclusive marches across Pakistan (Saigol & Chaudhary, 2020). Placards are the major medium of expression adopted by participants of these marches to highlight women's issues and confront patriarchy (Akhtar, Aziz & Almas, 2021). The Aurat March is indicative of the third wave of feminism in Pakistan as it highlights body politics and asserts sexual rights (Batoool & Malik, 2021). Hence, placards claim bodily autonomy and sexual rights which has earned the Aurat March strong resistance from religious groups that deem it immoral. Religious groups brand it as an anti-Islamic campaign and a Western notion (Naz, Shahid & Irshad, 2022; Salman, 2022). Media plays a pivotal role in steering the discourse around placards by focusing only on controversial banners and placards (Baig, et al., 2020). It highlights only the debatable slogans while leaving out posters calling for women's autonomy, promoting gender equality in society, women's abuse in private and public spaces, and suppression of women's bodies (Memon, 2021)

These slogans are not imported from the West but interwoven in indigenous women's daily situations, rather than focusing on the explicit, they increasingly focused on the universal, leading to an all-encompassing critique of social structural inequities. Placards are utilized as a venue for delegitimizing and undermining the movement through internet disinformation operations (Kamal, 2021). This misinterpretation of slogans by focusing merely on semantics rather than deeper meaning maligns the image of the March (Minhas, et al., 2020). Discourse analysis of slogans is required to discover their implicit meanings as

Batool & Saeed

well as modern social and street attitudes regarding feminism and gender roles (Tara et al., 2020). By painting the March as radical and Western, the media has shifted focus from the issues of women to the semantics of slogans (Saeed & Leghari, 2019). The acrimonious interactions between secular and Islamic feminist movements in Pakistan hinder effective social change (Serez, 2017).

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research design was used for the current study. Interviews were conducted with eight Aurat March organizers from Lahore, Karachi, Hyderabad, and Islamabad, as well as twelve opinion leaders including media persons, religious leaders, teachers, and parliamentarians. The interviews were transcribed, and a thematic analysis was conducted.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Issues raised in Aurat March

Charter of demands: the voice of local women or a Western agenda

According to Aurat March organizers, charter development is a democratic process done by local volunteers recruited through social media drives. Once recruited, volunteers meet publicly to draft a Charter of Demand spanning women's health, girls' education, economic justice, discrimination at home, child abuse, domestic workers' rights, minority rights, missing persons, and other human rights violations.

Understanding the Aurat March Slogans

“Now every year we make a charter of demand and mention all those rights and issues that should be getting (but don’t get enough) attention. The charter of demand also mentions the rights of the home-based worker; how much work do they do? How much do they get paid? They are hired by the middlemen. Resources are scarce for them if they cannot work outside the home. They should at least get health cards because when they get sick they get medicine-free by health cards. Home-based workers are not formal workers.”
(Aurat March Organizer-1).

In contrast, many opinion leaders deem the Charter of Demands as a Western agenda, not a product of local struggle. They accuse AM of undermining the family system instead of focusing on the issues of local women.

“The issues raised in AM are the issues of Western countries, not Pakistan. Such issues are not happening in our countries..... In the AM, men are presented as the most untrusted. AM is not serving its purpose, it was started to protect women’s rights, but the event of AM does not reflect the real meaning of AM. AM should talk about the violence against women, women’s health, and women’s inheritance rights”. (MPA – 2)

Batool & Saeed

Similarly, religious leaders raised concerns about slogans raised in AM;

“AM should raise posters about these issues. But the AM is raising the issues like “I am not answerable to my father and brother”. (Religious Leader- 4) “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 and play songs along with the immoral posters? “(Religious Leader- 3)

AM Slogans; Women empowerment or suppression

The AM organizers assert that it’s a free space where participants are encouraged to express themselves through personalized posters focusing on issues they consider important including, but not limited, to body rights, against patriarchy and misogyny, equal wages, displacement of slums (*kachi abadies*), violence against women, justice, reclaiming public spaces, and safe transportation.

“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 that is raised by any women in the AM. Every issue is important for someone. We mobilized a larger number of people, and we outreached the community.” (Aurat March Organizer-5).

While speaking about criticism faced over body rights advocacy, another AM organizer claimed that issues

Understanding the Aurat March Slogans

raised in AM are merely a reflection of women's lived experiences.

“Sometimes we are also criticized by the senior feminists that we are not talking about serious issues. But the fact is that we cannot control the expression of people (AM participants). We do explanations on most criticized posters. As in 2020 the poster on “Mera jism, meri marzi” was extremely criticized. These posters are coming organically.” (AM organizer – 3)

“I believed that there was nothing wrong with the posters. I disagree but some reasonable feminists said that it was strategically wrong to display such kinds of posters because these posters gave backlash to women's rights struggle instead of benefiting it. But the question is how we can control a larger mass from freedom of expression.

There it is not that women are treated as marginalized but also their movements are declared controversial.” (Aurat March Organizer-6)

Though AM claims to be a voice of women, for women, many opinion leaders consider it detrimental to women's image.

“But for me, slogans like “main roti naibnaogi” “main khana garam nai Karo gi” are not the issues to be raised ... I feel

Batool & Saeed

that such slogans attempted to damage the real cause of AM or may be consciously or unconsciously such slogans were raised to manipulate the AM concept.” (Teacher – 2)

Personal-political divide: Valid or invalid

Women’s dual burden was also emphasized by AM organizers. Modern women’s burden is two-fold as she is expected to excel both in domestic and professional arenas. Moreover, they stressed the political nature of personal asserting that discrimination starts at home and impacts all other spheres of women’s lives.

“People who participate in the AM are taking ownership of AM. I guess, the 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 started from home. But when the AM participants raised these domestic level discriminations in the AM, it is being mocked by the people but, these are serious issues.” (AM organizer – 6)

Many opinion leaders invalidated this view by contending that AM should go beyond personal.

“AM had put aside these core issues. AM people have been focused on personal issues instead of collective issues. AM people are from the elite class. All the issues they brought in the AM were

Understanding the Aurat March Slogans

personal. AM had put aside these core issues. AM mixed their issues with the women's issues. (MPA-1).

Bodily autonomy: a right or contravention of norms

AM contends that body rights are a vast field extending to education, reproduction, marital rape, sexual violence, and forced conversions. A media person advocated for women's bodily autonomy through family planning.

“Women's education and “reproductive health” are very important. Family planning is also important, it is natural that a woman gives birth to a baby and takes care of the kid but it is not fine that a woman does not have control of her body. So should have control over her own body to decide to give birth. If a woman gives birth to a child every year it would be dangerous for herself and the children.”

In the opinion of the Aurat March organizer, the issue of sexual harassment was highlighted. As one of the Karachi Aurat March organizers;

“There were a lot of demands. We put “sexual violence” from the right of the binding. In year one (2018) we mainly emphasized it because of the #metoo movement in the first.

AM many of the participants were those who survived of sexual harassment.” (AM organizer 3)

Batool & Saeed

Forced conversion of minority women is also an alarming issue in the country. Aurat March raised this issue. As an organizer stated;

“As minority women are suffering in the workplace. Recently a nurse was tortured in Lahore at her workplace. “Minority women have been forced to convert”. These minority women include Hindu, Sikh, and Christian.” (AM organizer -4)

AM organizers argued that the media is partly responsible for distorting the image of AM by misinterpreting its slogans.

“But media created sensations to get a high rating on AM. One poster of “Mera jism meri marzi “was criticized in the media but this led to many discussions among people. Now the cases of violence against women are being materialized. There were a lot of talk shows on AM slogans, but at least people started conversations about violence against women and realized the reality of social taboos.” (AM organizer -4)

Opponents of AM consider bodily anatomy a contravention of religious and cultural norms.

“There is no understanding of “marital rape” in our society. As it is considered that if there is a marriage contract, the wife is liable to obey her husband in every condition and it is the legitimate right of a

Understanding the Aurat March Slogans

man to control his wife.” (Religious Leader- 3)

Women’s dignity: a right or vulgarity

In response to criticism of the language used in the posters, AM organizers claimed that they were meant to only highlight the harassment faced by women regularly and reinforce their right to dignity. Unfortunately, many people overlook this, focusing only on the language used.

“In 2019, there was the poster “apni dick pics, apny pas rakho” which meant that we do not want to see someone’s private part in our inbox.... That was about privacy and individuals’ dignity rights ... but people were more concerned about how women could have used these words. Men are showing and flashing their private parts on the roads, but it doesn’t affect these people people are more conscious about our (posters) language rather than the issue that is raised. It is not that those (posters) issues do not exist in our society. (AM organizer – 7)

She also added that that the slogan “my body, my choice” (mera jism, meri marzi) was misinterpreted. The real meaning of this slogan was about women’s body rights. This slogan carries the meaning of all exploitation of women’s bodies which includes; women’s reproductive health, physical harassment, and the low wages that women are suffering in everyday life.

Batool & Saeed

“Mera Jism meri marzi” meant safety, protection, and dignity.... It meant that “no one can touch my body without my consent, I should not be forced to bear children, I should not be forced to force marriage.... One of the senior WAF members said that it also implied that “forced labor” as well ... people are forced to work more than the wages Some laborers have to work to more than their physical capacity just to earn enough money for their survival. We tried to explain these slogans but people misinterpreted this. By giving the wrong interpretation to the “mera jism meri marzi”, it was showed to the people that these are bad women and why would anyone can ally with them “ye aurtenghaleezbateinkartihain”. (AM organizer 7)

Though these slogans advocate for women’s right to respect, opponents often consider them to be antithetical to religious values and social norms.

“There were no posters for women’s rights. I have observed there is a certain group that is dragging women to the edge where is only Western culture. Our men are good but we always criticize them. If there are some violations happening, they are happening with both men and women. All the posters in AM reflected frustration.

Understanding the Aurat March Slogans

It was like you were telling people about your inner self and telling people what you are inside. Fruit only looks beautiful when it is covered, uncovered fruit loses its beauty. All the slogans and posters were an effort to bring vulgarity and shamelessness into society.” (MPA –2)

Domestic violence: issue or norm

AM organizers called attention to domestic violence and killings of women over trivial issues, such as salt in food, time of serving food, etc.

“There was a poster “apnakhana, khud gharam Karlo” so 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. And there was a poster “apnamoza, khud talsh Karlo” that was the humorous way.” (Aurat March Organizer-6)

An Aurat March organizer from Lahore argued that women who have faced heinous forms of violence should not be expected to be polite about it.

All posters were important. I support everyone who comes out with her experience. Women have seen violence, or they have been impacted by something so strong so I would never ask them to

Batool & Saeed

be polite. Yes, some of the posters were in strict language. Those posters were misinterpreted, and people marked them bluntly. AM organizers announced a free call to people to come to join AM and bring posters whatever they want. (AM organizer -4).

One of the Aurat Azadi March organizers added that criticism of the language of the poster is just an excuse for criticism. The real issue is that people are afraid to talk about family violence against women. Women therefore have the right to express their opinions and speak out against any violations of those rights. As stated by Islamabad Aurat Azadi March organizer stated that;

“In the beginning, we thought to ask people to come with some changed and acceptable language. But this year we have realized that the problem is not how we say and what we

say the actual problem is what we say. In Pakistan, when we do not talk about family (khandan) violence it will not resolve.”
(AM organizer -8)

“There is nothing wrong with the slogans but we have to think about it for the sake of the women’s movement. I know the slogans are the only excuse from the opponent groups to stop the women’s movement. Also, it is a fact that this slogan will raise, whether we (AM) support it or not because these are rights of women.” (AM organizer -3)

Understanding the Aurat March Slogans

But on the other side, the Aurat March organizers stated that these slogans generated a public debate on the hidden issues of women. This is a positive contribution of controversial posters. One of the Aurat March organizers stated;

“I think it is very important that women research to bring up their issues which created debate in society. It is also an achievement that the discourse on women is generated in our society.” (AM organizer – 5)

The opponents of AM continue to focus on the language rather than the issues they represent.

“Those AM posters which are criticized are not acceptable in Pakistani society. As was a poster in AM “apnamoza khud talashkarlo” but according to hadees women are the caretakers of their husbands, children, and home, so a husband asks her wife about the socks “so according to hadees women is the caretaker of homes so only she can tell about the lost socks otherwise who else can. Also, there was a poster “apnakhana khud garam karlo” so it is also wrong because a woman is the head of the home, she is responsible for serving food to her husband.”. (Religious Leader- 4)

Reasons for backlash on Aurat March

Threat from the empowered women

One of the key reasons for criticism of Aurat March is due to the resistance and protest by the empowered women. The participants of Aurat March were not vulnerable women and their resistance was to demand rights instead of a request for rights.

“The idea of the perfect victim or the ideal victim is that woman who is crying and defending. But if a woman like me is not presenting herself as a mother, sister, or wife who is crying for her miseries, I will not be appreciated. Or any woman who shows her agency, our society dislikes her. Here women are treated as second-class citizens but if she claims equality, she looks like a bad woman to society. We are also reflecting on our issues and pains but we are not bowing and crying and we do not look vulnerable (becharain) as society created an image of vulnerable women so that we are not listening. In AM, we show our resistance and ask for our rights rather than begging for our rights. AM participants’ women do not look valuable. People like us when we are mistreated and beaten by other people.” (AM organizer – 8)

One of the opinion leaders also stated that women’s appearance in public spaces is a threatening factor for people. As she mentioned;

Understanding the Aurat March Slogans

“For people, AM is a danger to Patriarchy. In this society, it is a big deal if even women capture the attention”.

(Teacher – 4)

On the contrary, the religious leaders had the view that the Aurat March was criticized because it had Western agenda and promoted foreign collusion against Pakistan. Also, Aurat March is supported by a limited group of people. One of the religious leaders from *Jamat-e-Islami* stated;

“Some people are saying that AM is foreign-funded. Some people say that there are some elements in the AM that are against our country’s peace also some embassies and other international agencies are involved in the AM. In the media, we heard that there were some cultural invasions in the AM. In our, society AM does not get much popularity. Only a small group of people are identified as liberals and scholars. These so-so-called liberals came up when they get funding and went when they do not have funds.” (Religious Leader- 1)

Confrontational Slogans

Aurat March organizers that in the past women’s movement was not confrontational, and the less vocal contemporary women’s movement is more confrontational and has more media coverage.

“Feminist sentiments existed forever but

Batool & Saeed

now the expression is more effective and good. Now the women's movement is more confrontational because the more you push the more you get the reaction. As there is the slogan "tera bap bhi de ga Azadi", people feel bad about this. In the past, women's issues were given less space in the media but now women's issues are in the limelight. As we have seen the extreme misogyny from Khalil --ur-Rehman while talking to Marvi Sarmad. So if the women's movement aims to change the mindsets of people, there should be both ways like listening to the critic or sometimes confronting it." (AM organizer – 6)

According to Aurat March organizers, they are accused of being rude because of open and vocal reflection on women's rights violation.

"So Aurat March makes the movement more vocal ... AM is labeled as being batmeez for certain things. That is the way that AM is strengthening the women's movement in Pakistan."

According to the opinion leader, the behavior of the organizers was aggressive and it led to the huge criticism on the Aurat March.

"People who claim themselves as the voice of women's rights should be more conscious and responsible about their behaviors and conversation ... they should

Understanding the Aurat March Slogans

not reflect anger in their tone and conversation.” (Teacher – 2)

Meanwhile, the religious leaders had the opinion that the Aurat March was slated because of its immoral demands and activities during the March. It was stated by a religious leader;

“Every country and society has its 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 tamshbeen will join AM, not for the sake of women’s rights but to satisfy their sexual needs.” (Religious Leader- 4)

Religious extremism and misinterpretation of the slogans

According to the Aurat March organizers, religion and patriarchal mindset are used to create hatred against Aurat March. One of the Aurat March organizers from Karachi stated that;

“The way religion is used becomes a major hurdle. In Pakistan, you cannot rationally discuss religion. The use of religion against us is a very big hurdle and it is not an easy fight to fight. The other connecting thing is patriarchy which is so enriched. It is even so entrenched in minds. We have struggled to free our minds from the patriarchy. Patriarchy is so influential.

Batool & Saeed

There is a need to raise awareness among the people within the movement to sensitization about the patriarchal forces. You have to be conscious and redefine the notion of womanhood.” (AM organizer -3)

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In the same way, MPAs had the view that Aurat March failed to reflect women’s issues. The issues that were raised in Aurat March were not the issues of the majority of Pakistani women. Another MPA stated that;

“If I look into the AM I observe a few things in it that being a woman, I did not see anything about my rights in the AM. In our society men respect a lot to women” (MPA – 2)

All of the religious leaders (participants) had the opinion

Understanding the Aurat March Slogans

that the Aurat March was against the family system and putting efforts to destroy the family culture. As one of the religious leaders said;

“I think those who do not get love and respect from their homes get revenge from society. I am not able to understand how people forget about their loving fathers, sons, brothers, and husbands while protesting against these relationships. The basic family unit is important for men and women. Those men and women get love and respect from the homes they transfer to society. So I believed that women are deprived of basic human rights”
(Religious Leader- 1)

CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, women’s movements have always been criticized by established institutions for challenging the status quo and presenting an alternate, equalitarian worldview. The current women’s movement in Pakistan has become a target of violent resistance by religious groups as it questions the private-public divide and brings body politics to the forefront. Though Aurat March is a peaceful movement that disputes violence against women, and advocates for environmental and labor rights, and human rights in general, it has been misinterpreted by opinion leaders. This has led to a disproportionate, violent backlash against the

Batool & Saeed

march. The current study shows that opinion leaders view women's empowerment as antithetical to conventional norms and dispute the medium used to propagate the message. By excessively focusing on the semantics of Aurat March's slogans, its opponents overlook the experiences of women in which these slogans are rooted. This is evident in the sensationalized use of 'merajisma meri marzi', and its misinterpretation as a sexual, vulgar slogan rather than understanding the larger context of body politics and autonomy.

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Batool & Saeed

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Understanding the Aurat March Slogans

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