

An Empirical Exchange between Feminist Polemics and Politics



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Abstract: *This study is a collection of first-hand interaction with people from a diverse range of backgrounds with their subjective opinions regarding the impact and challenges of feminist activism in Pakistan over the last two decades (2000-2020). Realising that the research about the impacts of Aurat March focusing on empirical realities and facts is limited, if not non-existent, we made a conscious choice of using some empirical methods including SWOT analysis, surveys, participant observation and opinions in different interactive sessions which unmask some interesting facts about Aurat March. The data generated out of all these methodological sources was then seen and analysed in the light of a set of research assumptions based on our reading and understanding of feminist discourse in Pakistan. Our analysis problematises many wide-spread perceptions associated with feminism as being elite, urban and distant from the actual concerns and realities of Pakistani women and culture and also highlights the crucial role academia can play to bridge the gap between feminist polemics and their politics. The data also acknowledges the potential of feminist movement in transforming society if it is willing not to negate but negotiate with the cultural and material realities which inevitably shape and influence its politics. The paper concludes that an inclusive approach towards feminism can fill many gaps left by contemporary sites of feminist activism, most importantly Aurat March.*

Keywords: feminist activism; academia; Aurat March; inclusive feminism

Introduction

This paper encapsulates a broad spectrum of data based on multiple forums of discussion and interaction, both direct and indirect, with people, including women academics, activists, civil society members, governmental and non-governmental organisations, students and scholars, artists and intellectuals, and a wide range of people with their myriad opinion and views on the complex subject of feminist politics, activism, and discourse in Pakistan as well as their global implication. The data has been primarily collected as part of a more significant project by the Higher Education Commission on gauging the impact of feminist

consciousness on Pakistani culture, with a particular focus on the last two decades, from 2000 to 2020. The objective is to understand the phenomenon of feminist activism, including the political claims of Aurat and other counter marchers, from the vantage of empirical exchange by arguing that the ideological contradictions embedded in the field can be better reconciled if they are to be taken to the constituency of opponents and proponents, hence establishing a more empirically-grounded explanation of this phenomenon. Without undermining the importance of polemics, which is so central in the feminist movement, such inquiry will offer a better and more empirically grounded understanding of the phenomenon of

feminist activism in the present as well as in the past by connecting it with the complex history of the indigenous feminist movement in Pakistan (Saigol, Kirmani, Zia, Rehman).

Methodology:

In this article, our focus on empirical exchange has helped us identify and shape our research questions and our outlook as researchers with a mindfulness that this will not mean ignoring polemics as they are the waters this fish lives in. However, focusing on the phenomenon from the empirical grounds requires us to think about where to find the possible answers or explanations of these questions, which are mainly polemical and rhetorical in nature but have a direct bearing on the lived experiences and actualities of Pakistani women.

Taking this into consideration, we decided to locate and contextualise our questions by:

1. Interacting with a cross-section of society
2. Assessing the magnitude of these polemics in the lives of Pakistani women and men from diverse political, ethnic, and intellectual backgrounds.

The method that we adopted in seeking the response to our questions is Triangulation, which involved raising the questions as they emerge from our exposure to literature on the subject and our subjective understanding, discussing the issues and debates related to these questions in different platforms, including the focus group/ round table discussions and then finally comparing and contrasting our assumptions with some research/polls /surveys that exist independent of the former two domains. This method allows for a more rigorous outcome by offering new angles to view the subject from multiple perspectives, and from which new categories of analysis emerge with more depth and diversity (Jansen, 2024).

In the following lines, we have presented the first two facets of our research that raise some questions regarding the phenomenon of feminist activism in Pakistan and then seek their explanation by inviting and engaging different stakeholders, primarily from academia and civil

society. This paper represents a broad outline of our discussion on the sites of different marches surfacing in Pakistani society in the past few years. Most notable among these sites are Aurat and Haya March, in which different groups of women have showcased their political agenda with regards to Pakistani women's position in their society. In so doing, these two sites have represented myriad forms of feminist activism in Pakistan in the backdrop of many local and global challenges facing Pakistani women.

However, it is important to present a brief discussion of feminist politics in Pakistan as they are discursively represented in literature and how they anchor our analysis and engagement with the issue under discussion.

Literature Review:

Aisha Qureshi (2020) rejects the categorisation of Aurat March in the secular Western paradigm by asserting that Feminist activists have demonstrated an inclination towards local issues and local diction to indigenize their activism. She further argues in favour of the March that instead of conforming to a Western feminist model strives for a more Indigenous version of feminism. One evidence of this indigeneity can be seen in its attempt to reclaim feminist discourse through the use of words in Urdu. Phrases like *piddarshahi* (*patriarchy*) and *behenchaara* (*sisterhood*) are something that has become more common in use after the Aurat March. She also criticised media for reinforcing the impression that Aurat March is an unrepresentative, elitist, Western-sponsored, secular and anti-Islamic movement. Instead of focusing on the agenda, the media coverage is more focused on "the clothing and the class background of the participants" and is responsible for trivialising the demands and slogans that the participants raised. She is particularly critical of the right-wing in Pakistan that tries to project Aurat March as a Western funded anti-Islamic project; however, in her words, it is "neither secular nor religious and we must perceive it and carry it as a joint struggle against patriarchy" (Qureshi, 2020).

Rubina Saigol (2016) argues that feminist activism in Pakistan lacks coherence as it is

always caught up between the demands of collaboration, compromise, and confrontations. With regards to the ideology and rhetoric of the indigenous feminist movement, she mentions the differing shades of opinion about the secular nature of their activism. While one group demonstrates their “strong belief in the human rights framework,” another group within the movement envisions a socialist society. The former she names as a liberal feminist view remained the “dominant strand” of the movement in Pakistan, with their ambivalent relation with state and society since “the human rights discourse” they did or do promote “seemed less threatening than socialist or communist ideas (Saigol, 2016, p.16). Hence liberal feminism, in her view is less radical than socialist feminism in terms of challenging socioeconomic and political structures, but demands equality for women within the given framework of the nation-state. On the other hand, Radical feminists point to the ideological and material structure of patriarchy and its specific articulation within tribal, feudal, and capitalist forms (Saigol, 2016, p.17). It is important to mention that with a gradual silencing of social feminist voices in Pakistan, especially after the repressive military rule in the '80s and '90s, we can see the representation of this radical feminist version in the political slogan of Aurat March.

However, despite many derivatives of feminism in global and indigenous settings, Saigol identifies “an absence of a vibrant and forceful women’s movement of the kind observed in the 1980s on the horizon” (Saigol, 2016, p. 32). In her words: “There seems to be a deafening silence, a pregnant pause, a disquieting quiet in the women’s movement today. It seems as if there is a pause - a hiatus as the heady activism and passionate engagement of yesteryear seems to be missing” (Saigol, 2016, p. 36).

She further connects this absence with the spectacles of Aurat March by arguing that despite creating “occasional rumblings of protest, of anger,” it has not been transformed into a “collective action” for creating “a world and shared understandings of the world in which

we live and work” (Saigol, 2016, p. 36).

This perspective is crucial for understanding the phenomenon of Aurat March and why it has not created a more participatory and inclusive model of activism to bring about a more gender-just society. In the following discussion, we have tried to open this question along with a host of related questions regarding the issue of feminist activism in Pakistan, with a particular focus on the nature and agenda of Aurat March and how different groups of society have viewed it.

QUESTIONS:

The objective of this empirical exchange has been to present the existing landscape of feminist activism that offers an acute ideological and political polarisation in Pakistani society. In recent years, the dissenting voices in different groups of the feminist movement, especially those showcased in women's demonstrations in Aurat and Haya March, have pointed to the inherent polyphony and diversity within the movement itself. However, at the level of society, they seem to have created many divides.

This invites specific fundamental questions that we posed in front of our audience in different sessions and platforms as follows:

What are the different versions of feminism you see on the ground, and how well do they represent the issues and challenges faced by Pakistani women? How do you comment on Pakistani feminism's shift from fighting against state oppression to confronting societal norms by asserting body politics and breaking from the dichotomy of public and private? What impact does this transgressive feminist politics have on society, especially on those who are familiar with the academic debates of feminism? What role has the technology or Digital technology played in disseminating feminist activism in the context of different women's marches? How would you respond to the objection that feminism in Pakistan is the result of this digital hype and has not touched the fundamental issues of Pakistani women? What roles has religion played in shaping the alternative politics of right-wing feminism in Pakistan? Out of the secular or religious models of feminism, what, in your view, is a more realistic representation

of feminist activism in Pakistan? How would you respond to the charge of elitism and the Western agenda levelled against feminism in Pakistan? What is academia's role in bridging the gap between feminist politics in the street and the lived realities of Pakistani women?

DISCUSSION & ANALYSIS:

This section presents the findings of surveys, interactive sessions, seminars, and academic discussions conducted to find the impact, challenges, and issues of the feminist movement in Pakistan, with a particular focus on Aurat March as the most representative site of feminist activism since 2018. The data collected through different methods, including the SWOT analyses (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats), seminars, interactive sessions, and interviews, provide a comprehensive view of feminist activism in recent years and, most importantly, different marches by women in Pakistan.

As the name suggests, SWOT analysis is a framework to help assess and understand the internal and external forces that may create opportunities or risks for an organisation or a project. (Pratt, 2023) It was carried out in three universities, i.e., the Psychology Department at Government College University Faisalabad, the Gender Studies Department at the University of Peshawar, and the English Department at the University of Faisalabad, with the objective of analysing the issues, gains, and challenges related to Aurat March and other sites of feminist activism in Pakistan's recent history.

The SWOT analysis brought light to the strengths of the feminist movement, i.e., The Aurat March, highlighting such campaigns played a significant role in spotlighting women's rights issues such as domestic violence, reproductive health, and consent. Respondents in both surveys held at UOP and TUF encouraged the March's crucial role in uplifting women to question patriarchal norms, demand equality, and integrate their agency. Not only that, March provided women an opportunity to exchange debates on traditionally taboo topics and underscore women's importance in both public and private spheres. Above all, many

participants agreed that Aurat March has united all women from diverse backgrounds for a collective goal. It further revealed that such platforms have encouraged women to share their stories and participate in activism, creating an atmosphere of collective agency and community. First and foremost, the surveys unveiled that the movement cultivated an aura of courage, as women challenged stereotypes and demanded rights, breaking societal taboos and paving the way for more significant gender equity.

The comprehensive study of analysis also unveiled weaknesses related to the movement. The survey also highlighted several weaknesses related to the movement that impeded its impact. For instance, respondents argued that the movement failed to address perspectives from diverse cultural, religious, and ethnic backgrounds. Some respondents imposed a charge of elitism on its organisers, saying it is run by individuals who are privileged and enjoying all rights. In addition, some of the respondents argued that Aurat March can become the reason for oppression for many who want to reject the regressive customs by subscribing to healthy and positive traditions of their culture. Moreover, Aurat March faced a severe backlash for targeting the male gender, which signified its disregard for ethical norms in the society of Pakistan. Furthermore, some respondents believed that the movement couldn't receive widespread recognition due to some cultural, psychological, and linguistic barriers created by women activists and their larger constituencies in society. Moreover, participants argued that nature and impact of certain slogans have lost their political provocations and ceased to incite public actions only creating clamour and din by the public. Thus, respondents argued that Aurat March has damaged the idea of inclusivity, which is central to feminist politics in indigenous as well as global contexts.

This study demonstrates the opportunities revealed by the SWOT analysis of the Impact of Aurat March. The participants explained that Aurat March had given women a platform for voicing their politics and made them realise their

subjective position and identity. Moreover, some argued that it is the gain of Aurat March that men are embracing it also. As one of the participants proposed the possibility of being more reflective in the use of slogans suggesting *Meri Soch Meri Marzi* would have been less controversial than *Mera Jism Meri Marzi*. It denounces the idea of women merely as bodies and endorses their position as agentive and creative beings capable of making decisions. Furthermore, participants highlighted Aurat March, an effective and transformative movement that created solidarity and activism among women. Respondents stressed the role of women academics in feminist discourse to bridge the gap between academia and activism.

This study also presents some of the threats related to Aurat March identified by SWOT analysis. The main threat faced by women's activism in Pakistan is the skewed representation of their rhetoric and politics by the media. Respondents highlighted that mainstream media channels have failed to portray the historical struggles of women's activism, thus reinforcing a highly polarized view of women's issues. Consequently, making the possibility of dialogue and critical synthesis among competing views of Pakistani feminism harder. Some respondents argued that many people are not clear about the exact agenda of Aurat March. The lack of a unified agenda and partial efforts have impeded its impact in contrast to past feminist movements like the Women Action Forum (WAF). Some participants pointed out the digital gimmick of online feminism as a hyper-real space because likes, comments, and shares in the digital space create only illusions of activism without real-world participation, which includes seminars, workshops, and in-person events.

Our project team also had the chance to have an interview session with a faculty¹ member from The Gender Studies Department at the University of Peshawar. She exclusively shed light on the Aurat March and its impact on Pakhtun culture in response to the questions

asked, considering her specialty in the subject. The first question was asked about her response to the charge of elitism leveled against the feminist movement in Pakistan, and the second question was about her own experience of teaching feminism in conservative and traditional Pakhtun culture. While responding to the first question, she proposed that the perception of elitism can be dispelled by bringing in more local expressions of feminism. In responding to second question she detailed her approach to teaching feminism, which involved contrasting Western and Pakistani feminist movements. While Western feminism appeared abstract and distant to her students, the work of Khawar Mumtaz and Farida Shaheed, particularly their 1987 book on Pakistani feminism provided a more relatable framework for understanding the subject. This book, though somewhat biased (as it has been written by an urban academic background) became foundational in exploring the feminist history of Pakistan. However, she said that whenever her students sought information on feminism in KP, there was a notable absence of local literature and movements, prompting her research into contemporary women's activism in the region.

Her investigation revealed a fragmented landscape of NGOs working on women's issues, many of them hesitated to identify openly with feminism due to its problematic reputation. She encountered organizations like "*Hawanoor*," a small-scale initiative symbolizing grassroots activism, and *Khwendo Kor*, an elite NGO led by Maryam Bibi. She also told some fascinating facts about another organization, *Khwendo Kor*, which works for the welfare of women and is run by Maryam Bibi, who has a strong political background. She added that Maryam Bibi used to wear a white *chadar* covering her body and presenting the image of a domestic woman. She said that her efforts can be considered as individual initiatives, not part of any larger organization, and it is the only organization that worked in remote areas for their familiarity with local language and customs. However, after the

¹ Miss Ayesha Aalam, an academic at University of Peshawar

uprising of *Tehreek e Nifaz e Shariat E Muhammadi* (TNSM), founded by Sufi Muhammad bin Alhazrat Hassan, all welfare projects of Khwendo Kor were banned in Swat and Malakand, as they were seen against the law imposed in these regions. Then, she mentioned the mainstream organization Women Action Forum (WAF) and its little presence in KPK due to its radical agenda. Likewise, she did not find any notable presence of the Aurat march in Peshawar and other areas of KPK.

Afterward, she talked about another feminist organization, "Feminist Friday," which comprises an informal structure where women came, spent time together, played games, and pursued discussions on contemporary debates. Referring to her interview with a female worker in Shirkat Gaah, she said that even such mainstream organizations do not support Aurat March due to its exclusivity. Contrary to this, the worker shared an instance of activism under the name of *Jamni Aurten*, in which women came out into the streets wearing purple *dupattas* and demanding their rights. The initiative successfully won the rightful position of women in KPK without provoking cultural sensitivities. Likewise, another movement named 16.12(*Solaa Bara*) Tehreek came to the surface but vanished due to its dependency on donors and funding.

In the last, she shared her own experience of knowing people who work for women's causes but avoided being called feminists to stay away from controversies. She suggested that people should avoid taking extreme positions while showcasing their activism, as it leads to controversy. Likewise, a moderate and targeted feminist movement can produce better results without sparking controversial debates.

The Project team organised a seminar titled "Towards Inclusive Feminism" on November 13, 2024, at GC University Faisalabad. The seminar was a significant contribution towards taking an inclusive approach to feminism that embraces not just femininity but masculinity as

well. It was an insightful event where academics and scholars from various backgrounds talked about the challenges and possibilities inclusive feminism holds.

An M.Phil scholar posed a question to the panelist, stating that feminism, being a Western ideology, is different from our cultural and societal context. In the same way, how are the definitions of patriarchy and violence different in Eastern and Western societies and compatible in Pakistani society? Another participant humorously referenced the popular social media debate "Men vs. Bear", showing data where large number of women preferred to live alone in a forest with bear than men, which signifies the toxic portrayal of men. Aqsa, another participant, questioned the contradiction in societal expectations, while men are seen as providers and are duly acknowledged for performing this role, women, despite being the primary caregivers in family, remain unacknowledged and undermined for their services. Rejecting the notion that feminism in Pakistan is merely a western agenda, she emphasized the need to acknowledge Pakistani women's agency in demanding rights denied to them in their own cultural context.

The house was open for discussion and comments in which the academics from diverse background participated. An academic² from English Department highlighted the evolution of feminism and addressed the societal control and surveillance imposed on women. He rejected toxic masculinity and encouraged viewing qualities like kindness and care as human strengths. Some participants discussed the impact of visual culture and social media on the question of gender by stressing the need to have critical engagement with media content to challenge the stereotypical norms it perpetuates. Another discussant³, reflected on historical practices, suggesting that women in the classical Islamic period enjoyed greater agency and autonomy than their modern counterparts.

² Dr. Asif, an Academic from GC Univeristy Faisalabad

³ Mr. Nawaz Khalid Arbi, an Academic and Bureaucrat

Another academic,⁴ supported the project of redefining concepts like patriarchy and misogyny in order to better align them with Pakistani context. By arguing against uncritical adoption of Western definitions, he contended that current societal structures are not strictly patriarchal but demand nuanced understanding. Another scholar ⁵who hailed from Lahore, advocated for diverse "feminisms" that integrate rights and responsibilities in a balanced manner. She critiqued radical feminist priorities where birth control pills are preferred over helping women against anaemia, malnutrition and maternal mortality. In response to one question regarding sex workers, she emphasised the need to assess whether sex work represents agency or exploitation in the light of reliable data on the socio-economic factors influencing women's professional choices and the cultural stereotyping associated with these choices. She also stressed examining indigenous feminist frameworks to address societal inequalities by underscoring the importance of culturally contextualized feminist approaches. Another scholar⁶ and organizer of the seminar, concluded the debate by promoting the notion of positive masculinity and enabling patriarchy as structures that empower rather than oppress both women and men without which the vision of an inclusive society cannot be materialised.

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⁴ Dr. Ghulam Murtaza from GC University Faisalabad

⁵ Dr. Saima Esma, an Author and Journalist

⁶ Dr. Asma Aftab, an Academic at GC University Faisalabad