



Pakistani Women's March, A Riveting Women's Movement- Striving for Change, Causing Disruptions and Reflecting Resilience- A Feminist Content Analysis of Poster Cards from The Marches Of 2018 To 2022

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Abstract

The paper aims to analyse the content of various placards from women's marches held in Pakistan. Women's march in Pakistan was initiated in 2018 from the biggest city, Karachi, of the country. Ever since its initiation, women's march is confronted with severe backlash. Women's march, its participants and displayed content in marches, is vehemently labelled as obscene, vulgar, and westernized (a negative trait in Pakistani society). This misogynistic resistance to a movement that is mainly asking for equal human rights is not only strong but unified and



collective. One thing that is common among all the critics of Pakistan's women's march is that they are severely critical of the placards. The posters are accused of being un-Islamic, immoral, and based on western political agendas. This paper aims to examine different elements of these placards to understand the offence against the content displayed on them. Also, whether the content is genuinely against core social, moral & Islamic values. The article would analyse the content through feminist lens by employing feminist content analysis method. The data would be the script, pictures, and signs on these placards, which would be closely read and analysed to form conclusive arguments.

Keywords: Pakistan women's march; Feminist placard analysis; Aurat March controversy; Misogyny in Pakistan; Feminist content analysis

Introduction

A day after the American president Donald Trump's first inauguration, on January 21st, 2017, women from diverse communities and backgrounds marched towards Washington in thousands. According to the *National Museum of American History's* website multiple sister marches were organized in the major US and global cities in solidarity (2020). Women initiated this organized protest in anger and frustration to protest the language and messages conveyed in presidential election campaign of Mr. Trump. The language in his campaigns was misogynistic, transphobic, and racist (Chira, 2020).

Women's march towards Washington and the wave of #MeToo in Hollywood blossomed many similar marches and events in various parts of the globe. Many #MeToo campaigns and mega disclosures regarding harassment were also made in developing countries like South-Korea, India, Philippines, Pakistan etc. At the same time women activists in various under-developed countries started organizing protest marches for equal rights. In many countries, women marches are now observed as a regular yearly event.

In 2018, a Pakistani transregional woman collective, popularly known as Hum Auratian (trans. We the women) with contributors from a wide variety of fields like health, education, journalism etc., initiated an organized yearly women's march under the title Aurat March (trans. women's march) from the metropolitan city, Karachi, of the country (Salman, 2022). Aurat march provides its description in the following way: 'Our feminism is queer, trans-inclusive, class conscious and seeks to embrace various disabilities – we seek to ensure intersectional politics that takes into account gender in relation to various other oppressions and injustices.'¹

Women who speak for or work for equal human rights have always faced intense and cruel criticism, no matter which geography, class, culture, or belief they belong to. The case of Pakistan's women's march is no different. There is an

extreme hostility towards Aurat march in Pakistan, so much so that in 2019 the entire provincial assembly of KPK province condemned Aurat march and labelled it to be vulgar and immoral (Chugtai, 2020).

A prominent ingredient of Aurat march is the posters that are displayed in the protest. Each year Aurat March issues a thoughtful theme which is reflective of women's plight and the need of women's equal rights. On the first year of Aurat March, in 2018, the theme was, 'Solidarity', in 2020 the theme was 'Mera Jism Mery Marzy' (trans. My Body My Choice), whereas in 2022 women's march theme was 'Ujrazt, Tahfuz, Sakoon' (trans. Wage, Security, Peace). Each year participants and organizers weave together creative, witty, and smart slogans, signs, and tag lines- that negate, reject, and ridicule the normalized patriarchal norms.

In a regressive society, the very act of women marching for their rights out-on-the roads itself is considered disrespectful (Akhtar et al., 2021), therefore, a march with bold (a negative trait for women in Pakistan), blatant and angry texts and signs definitely 'attracted animosity' (Chugtai, 2020). Even Taliban called out the march posters to be 'actively spreading obscenity and vulgarity' (Khan, 2021). The posters are disparaged by the traditional, conservative feminists. Kishwar Naheed, a popular and openly feminist scholar who has spoken for women rights

¹ facebook. n.d.,

for years, while speaking to the audience during *Sindh Aurat Tanzeem* (trans. Sindh women union) event said: ‘The Aurat March slogans have transgressed cultural values, they have lost sight of tradition’ (Khatri, 2019). Ms. Naheed went so far as saying that women should not call themselves ‘Azaad’ (trans. Free), she further added women freedom is in law and not in their bodies and tongues. Popular Pakistani actresses, Veena Malik and Yasra Rizvi, who themselves have frequently performed roles and chose discussions which defied traditional guidelines for women to operate in the society, got triggered by the slogans and called Aurat March posters to be ‘vulgar.’ They expressed that such slogans ‘dilute the movement’s message’ and have shifted the attention from ‘real causes’ (Khatri, 2019).

The above discussion stresses female academicians and scholars to dig deeper into these hateful narratives that are passionately propagated to maintain status-quo. To fail Aurat march, damaging and dangerous tactics are used repetitively like accusing the marchers to have committed blasphemy (through a fabricated video), which according to Pakistani law is punishable-by-death offense (Khan, 2021). Feminist scholars of Pakistan must take up this serious and much needed task of simplifying and spreading the rightful narrative of female activists who are striving under high risk to get laws passed and to change the

<https://www.facebook.com/auratmarchlahore/posts/592942244514574>.

general mindset by bringing the taboo topics and norms at the forefront discussions through their chanting, and by upholding harmless posters and signs.

Importance of the Problem

The following blog post with the title '*Feminism-is it modernity or cultural invasion*' is an apt reflection of the mindset that critiques Pakistani feminists and their activism:

Unfortunately, feminism in Pakistan inducted by west culture, ruined our culture. Women in Pakistan started following western culture. The play cards like Mera jism Meri Marz, I am not a production machine ... We being Muslim society have to stop this invasion to prevent a terrible destruction. A nation can make itself a progressive on the basis of values. It is values that differ a nation from others. In order to save our generation from western culture, we have to revive our cultural values and norms (Bhutto, 2020).

Pakistani feminists are repeatedly labelled to be the agents of West and vested interests. Most feminists articulate their cases in English language; therefore, it is perceived that all of them are privileged and belong to a certain elitist segment since a large section of women do not have access to learning English language (Salman, 2022). Such narratives are hollow because most of the placards in Aurat march that are widely criticized are in Urdu language, so as Aisha Salman puts it that 'being in language does not equate to *being* of that language' (2022, 58). Women activism like women marches, undoubtedly, have their origins in 'Global North.' Aisha Salman has substantially proven the fact, in her detailed paper, *The*

West and the Feminist: Contemporary Feminist Activism in Pakistan and the Politics of National Culture, that the relationship of feminist activism with its historic roots in western sphere does not mean that the critique of local misogynistic culture is ‘necessarily Eurocentric’ (2022: 56).

Pakistani women activists have spoken for their rights ever since its existence. In the first constitutional assembly of the country, two prominent female leaders Jhanaara Shah Nawaz and Shahista Ikramullah contested the male chauvinistic idea that national assembly should only allow veiled, above 50 years of age women’s presence. Similarly, in 1950s a women’s movement against the then prime minister’s second marriage resulted in women-rights based laws related to marriage, divorce, maintenance, and children’s custody (Saigol, 2016). Women’s struggles over the years and of the present times need appropriate highlighting and sufficient interpretation to substantiate the truth that women are treated unfairly and the outcry against the injustice is very local and Pakistani.

Despite negating the idea that Pakistani feminists are agents of western hidden agenda, it is true that local scholars do heavily rely on Western theories and frameworks to understand the local contexts. Western feminism is very ‘white,’ Eurocentric, and arrogant which has remained ignorant of the struggles and strives of the coloured women and of the women that belong to the non-white parts of the globe. Western feminism even when it has spoken for post-colonized

women has maintained its hegemonic status. Chandra Mohanty states, 'western feminist writing on women in the third world must be considered in the context of global hegemony of western scholarship' (1988: 62). The US initiated women's march does not even recognize its sister march, Aurat march, on its official website (Akhtar et al., 2021). It is very crucial for local scholars to establish their local feminist narrative that is truly reflective of local scenarios and gender problems, and thus propose accurate solutions to local female and other genders' issues.

Another very important reason for conducting the current study is the rise of fake news and its intense propagation through mass-media. There were multiple social media accounts ever since the first Aurat march that doctored the actual Aurat march posters and purposely made them obscene and irrelevant to core issues. One such poster, as exposed in 2020 by a personal blog LENS², altered the actual poster that said, 'have you learnt how to heat your food' into a very sensual statement, 'insert (penis) but with love.' Also, a doctored video, as reported by US Institute of Peace website (2021), blamed organizers of blasphemy and it went viral. Such efforts to malign, alter, divert, and delay the core feminist agenda gets exposed by studies that are evidence based and that heavily rely on bringing the accurate narrative out.

Leavy (2007) states that feminists have very successfully questioned the cultural narratives to dismantle the patriarchal interpretation of social reality. And their continuous success is in exposing of these distorted, misogynistic interpretations of cultural texts that demote women and minority communities to the very corner of their culture where they disappear ‘from the social interpretive practices’ (Zaheer 2020: 32).

Methodology

Creswell (2013) asserts that qualitative research primarily relies on visual and verbal data. The data for this study is textual and visual because of the research focus. This study employs feminist content analysis, as proposed by Leavy (2000) and later refined by Harris & Leavy, in 2018, in their book *Contemporary feminist research*, for data collection and data analysis. At the same time for informed data analysis, in relation to its cultural and historical context, a very relevant textual analysis method, proposed by Catherine Belsey, is used.

Catherine Belsey in the very opening of her essay establishes that textual analysis is indispensable in research related to cultural criticism (2005). The methodology she proposes is to closely study language, symbols, pictures within

² “These Aurat March Posters Were Photoshopped to Look Un-Islamic ..,” n.d., accessed July 4, 2022, <https://propakistani.pk/lens/these-aurat-march-posters-were-photoshopped-to-look-un-islamic-and-vulgar/>.

their literal context, along with their historical and cultural context. She argues that first a researcher should develop his/her own understanding of text by focusing on minor details of text, figuring the intention of text-for whom it is intended and the context the text exists in. After personal understanding, a researcher should rely on secondary sources as well to come up with a new viewpoint and new meanings of the under-study text, calling it the originality of a researcher. Catherine Belsey (2005) states in her essay that meanings are plural and “interpretation always involves extra-textual knowledge.”

A total of 12 posters, from 2018 to 2022, are collected as a data sample, roughly 3 posters from each year's march are taken. The reason for collecting only 3 posters from each march is to keep the study focused, in terms of research objectives and critical analysis. Since there is no official website of Aurat March Pakistan, the posters are collected from various sources like national newspapers, personal twitter handles of the protesters & organizers, Aurat March's official Facebook page and from established blogs. Aurat march organizers formally announce each year's march well before time and press coverage is allowed to national and international media channels, press and specified bloggers; therefore, the participants are aware of public coverage of the event. People who do not want to show their faces usually participate with face masks or other sorts of covering on their faces.

The collected posters and the content written or spoken about them, in newspapers, media channels, blogs etc. are then placed in categories to make the study more scientifically understandable and approachable. The researcher has designed three categories, based on the accusations and debates against the posters and the content of posters themselves. First category includes posters that are considered against defined Pakistani gender values, second category includes posters that are considered vulgar and obscene, and third category includes posters which seem and/or are accused of refuting or insulting Islamic instructions.

The defined categories for the data are not based on a theoretical position rather as suggested in conventional content analysis, the categories are established from the data itself (Kondracki & Wellman 2002). Kondracki and Wellman (2002) suggest that a researcher should immerse in the data to define understandable categories and these categories may keep changing even during analysis. With conventional content analysis the relevant theories and related research studies are discussed in the discussion section (Hsieh et al., 2005). The benefit of conventional content analysis approach is that it is free of bias and preconceived classifications based on theories or previous research studies (Hsieh et al., 2005).

The data from these posters itself is collected through reading and note-taking as suggested by Sudaryanto (2015). By analysing the posters' content, through discourse and textual analysis and note taking, the research has examined the feminist values operating in these posters. Multiple steps employed in data analysis are establishing context, assembling corpus, exploring source material, studying source material discursively, establishing an argument, and bringing forth findings and discussion.

Findings and Discussion

This section analyses the selected Aurat March posters in detail to understand the content that is accused of violating traditional values, promoting obscenity and vulgarity, and reinforcing western norms to eliminate the local Islamic values of national and cultural identity and in the end, it aims to establish whether the posters genuinely are hurting the core of eastern Pakistani moral values and disrupting the uniform social fabric or not?

One poster (see fig.1) in the very first Aurat march, held in 2018, literally caused a havoc on social media, resulting in intensely heated arguments, was 'apna khana khud garam kro' (trans. Heat your own food). The poster (see fig 1) was considered defiance of prideful cultural norms and a part of Aurat march's non-visionary politics (Salman, 2022: 53).



Figure 1: <https://images.dawn.com/news/1179795/why-i-made-the-sign-khud-khana-garam-karlo>

Many social media users laughed at Aurat march seriousness towards real issues. A popular Facebook page, Satirical Affairs, reposted the image of the very poster and wrote, ‘The kind of things phuarr (trans. Unequipped to perform domestic tasks) women want, bet this woman can’t fry an egg but wants to change the world’ (Salman, 2022: 53). Mansoor Ahmad (2015) wrote that society considers it unmanly for a man to clean his house or wash the dishes, therefore in this background where domestic chores are labelled to be inferior and particularly set for women such posters spark heat in common public. The writer of this very poster, Ms. Asna, published a blog article in The Dawn newspaper explaining her reason for designing the poster; she said her aim was not to reverse the gender roles and subjugate men to domestic slavery of women rather to push the idea that men should be ‘self-sufficient’ in life tasks and also, she aimed to ‘change the very nature of male-female relationship in our society’ (Asna, 2018).

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In 2020 another poster, 'Mera Jism Mery Marzy' (trans. My body My choice) (see fig.2), according to Ammar Rashid, provincial head of the leftist Awami workers party, shook 'the patriarchy to the very core' (Chughtai, 2020).



Figure 2: <https://images.dawn.com/news/1184791>

Pakistani women's bodies, even their movements and all dress codes are regulated and monitored by males, especially by male clerics, and this repressive discourse was vastly promoted in Zia's regime, country's worst dictator (Zubair, 2022: 307). A woman that involves herself in male domain is called 'provocative and offensive' (Stroti, 1990: 66). In such society where women supposedly belong to 'chaddar and char dewary' (tras. Veils and four walls), the idea of so many women bodies occupying public roads has dazed the 'collective subconscious of the Pakistani psyche' (Zubair, 2022: 312). Historically the slogan 'My body, My choice' has come from Global north and was produced to ask for women's reproductive rights, now many miles away and more than 50 years later the same

slogan is re-used in local context to protest the horrible abuse against women bodies. Nida Kirmani, an associate professor at LUMS tweeted, explaining the poster in the following words:

#MeraJismMeriMarzi means opposing: rape sexual harassment child marriage physical abuse lack of healthcare domestic violence human trafficking bonded labor/slavery. Opposing this statement means perpetuating a culture that produces all of the above. #khalilurrehmanqamar³

In 2022 a woman upheld a very interesting poster (see fig.3) in response to the hatred spewed against ‘My body, My choice,’ which said ‘enke jism sa nhy marzy sa masla ha’ (trans. they don’t have a problem with the body rather they have a problem with women exercising their right on their own body). The response poster very aptly portrays the smart efforts of participants to address the allegations hurled against the content of posters.

³ Kirmani, Nida (2020): #MeraJismMeriMarzi means opposing. Online: <https://twitter.com/nidakirmani/status/1235057887308726274>, 1 September 2021.



Figure 3:
<https://mobile.twitter.com/AuratMarchKHI/status/1503757483596201988/photo/2>

Another poster (see fig.4) had a picture drawn of a woman sitting with open legs, a sitting style only considered appropriate for males, with the text ‘Lo bhaet gaye sahy sa’ (trans. Sitting correctly!) was ridiculed ruthlessly.



Figure 4: <https://www.incpak.com/entertainment/aurat-march-alleged-video-viral/>

Many people believe that participants with such posters have no clue of genuine female issues. However, women mobility or social conduct is a very genuine issue because it limits or takes away their focus from what they are doing to how correctly they are sitting or standing in a certain environment (Anjum, 2019). The sketched woman in this poster is not wearing any hijab (the head cover), she has her hair loose open on her shoulders and no mouth is drawn on her face, but there are glasses on her eyes. This sketch is very interesting for analysis from a moral and ethical standard of Pakistani society. The sketched female is defying the gendered 'norms of conduct' and modesty of its society (Masood, 2018). Dr.

Ayesha Masood in her paper, *Doing Gender, Modestly: Conceptualizing Workplace Experiences of Pakistani Women Doctors*, writes that 'hijab controls and encompasses' all aspects of Muslim and Pakistani life which results in women's 'restricted participation in the public sphere' (2018). The sketched female, with no mouth on her face, is not using her physical voice to get her message across rather her appearance is controlling her narrative, her right to exist on her own terms, as Gayatri Spivak suggested in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* that marginalized people must not spend their effort in making themselves heard to the status quo rather they should take a strong hold of their marginal traits and establish their identity (2015).

Another poster (see fig. 5) which was considered heinous was 'darty ma apna baap sa bhy nhy' (trans. I am not even scared of my father).

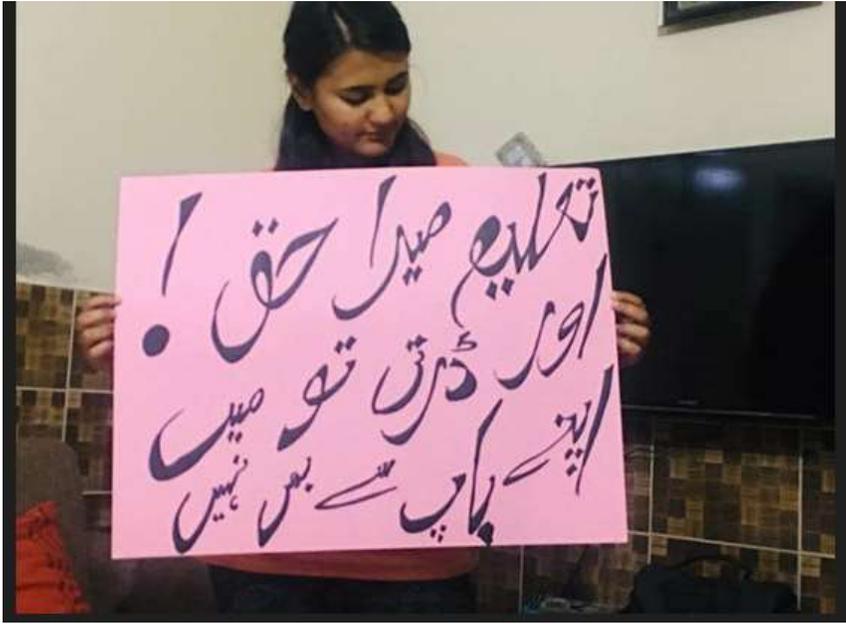


Figure 5: <https://isb.careeb.com.pk/aurat-march>

The poster was disliked by so many because it defies the guardianship of father and questions the male authority over the women. In Pakistani culture men are considered guardian, protector or rule maker for women and this trait of the society is revered for keeping women safe and protected, assuming that women are sensitive and delicate to protect themselves (Sili, 2017). A poster that says I am not afraid of my own father is labelled as shameful because fearing father means fearing God in Pakistani society.

All the above five posters are handwritten, and each style reflects personal handwriting of the poster's creator. Gosling in her web article, *Strongly Worded*

Letters: Typography and Modern Protest,⁴ states that the poster makers do not call themselves graphic designers, but they are, because their posters are snapshots of a broader tale that is personal as well as articulation of the bigger movement that they are fighting for (2020). Gosling references Dori Tunstall in her article who says that handwritten signs offer ‘some of the most memorable articulations of anger and hope we’re likely to see in any civilian-led protest. They also create lasting impact when photographed...’ (2020).

The coming 3 posters and related discussion would be about our second category regarding posters that are labelled as vulgar and lewd. Aurat march has not only been labelled as disrupting the well-knitted social fabric rather also of being vulgar, obscene, and shameful (Azeem, 2019). Posters like ‘bistar khud garam kr lo’ (Trans. Fulfil your own sexual needs) (see fig.6), ‘fahash hn’ (trans. I am obscene) and ‘ma ka naany ka, sb ka badla lain ga’ (trans. We will take revenge for our mothers, grandmothers and for everyone) are furiously responded by anti-feminists as directionless, elitist, and imported.

⁴ <https://www.monotype.com/resources/expertise/typography-and-modern-protest>



Figure 6: <https://khabarnaamaa.com/kp-assembly-condemns-shameless-slogans-aurat-march/>

As discussed above women are appreciated to remain in ‘charddar and chaar-dewaari’ (trans. Veil and four walls) therefore any representation, discussion or even mention of female gentiles or sexual issues is equated to vulgarity and obscenity. The poster that was furiously condemned for being obscene was, ‘apna bistar khud garam kro’ (trans. fulfil your own sexual needs) (see fig.6). Many feminists believe that the poster refers to the demand for women’ sexual rights, which are entirely absent in Pakistani society. Women are treated as sex objects along with domestic laborers with no say of their own even in a marital relationship, where a man and a woman are partners. According to human rights

watchdogs, violence like rape, marital rape, domestic abuse, harassment remain a significant problem in Pakistan (Ali, 2020). Nearly 47% of women living in twin cities, Islamabad, and Rawalpindi, informed about being forced to have sex by their spouses and almost no cases of marital rape are reported mainly due to ambiguity in law itself and due to severe lack of socio-cultural recognition of marital rape as offense. (Khan, 2020). So, the posters like the one mentioned above or the ones which say 'my body is not your battle ground' try to highlight issues like honour killing or lack of women reproductive rights in society.

Women have appropriated and owned the derogatory titles that they have been embellished with for years when they transgressed the boundaries that were set for them by patriarchy. In Pakistani society, a woman who rejects the presence of male guardians in normal course of life, who makes her own decisions, who focuses on her career or chooses her own life partner etc. is considered a loiter and characterless, so some women proudly owned these narratives and hurled posters that read 'Ma awara ma badchalan' (trans. I loiter; I am characterless) (see fig.7), 'akaely, awara, azaad' (tran. Alone, loiter and free) (see fig.8). Therefore, "Placards displaying subversive meanings accordingly aim to disrupt the hold that dominant messaging has on 'reality'" (Kamal, 2021).



Figure 7: <https://www.thenews.com.pk/magazine/you/444806-proud-to-be-a-woman>

Sabahat Zakariya, who works for *Voice of America* and very successfully runs a Facebook page under the title *Feminustani* (trans. The teacher of feminism), time to time simplifies and explains feminist concepts in relation to Pakistani context through her video messages. On March 7th, 2020 she published a seven and a half minutes long video⁵ (titled: Mein Awara Mein Badchalan) that interestingly and very simply explained how women have appropriated and owned the abusive labels, they have been shamed with, to exercise their authority. She very briefly explained the historical background and power of reclamation of degrading titles. Her concept is that the hurt of these abusive wounds can be

⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=137447644285326>

lessened, and the supremacy of these derogatory words has been and can be debilitated by this technique of re-appropriation.



Figure 8: <https://www.blanknoise.org/akeli-awaara-azaad-found>

In figure 8, the woman holding the poster is wearing a mask of another woman's face. This mask is of Qandeel Baloch, a Pakistani social media star, who was killed for honour by her brother. Qandeel Baloch was known as Kim Kardashian of Pakistan, and the same title was used for her by BBC in its article on 15th February 2016. Qandeel was vastly admonished for her bold and sexy appearance and talk. BBC reported that Qandeel was aware of the 'opposition she faced in the conservative Muslim country but was unapologetic'⁶. On the same poster, fuller red lips are drawn with the script, red lips were a signature look of

Qandeel Baloch and red lipstick is generally unappreciated, in Pakistani society, for unmarried women as they are a symbol of boldness and sexy-ness. The red lips, Qandeel Baloch's mask and the script (tran. Alone, loiter and free), all elements of dislike in the society, are embraced with pride by protesters as tropes of personal choice.

The next posters that will be discussed fall in the third category of posters that are considered against religious values. Pakistani law does not provide any space for criticism on God or Prophets, and anyone who is even accused of such actions have faced mob violence often. Similar tactic is used by anti-marchers to stop Aurat march organizers from holding further protests. Many placards were either mis-interpreted or manipulated to create an anti-religion narrative against the march. The effort against the march was so rigorous that in 2020 marchers were attacked with bricks and stones for provoking religious sentiments (Kamal, 2021).

An Aurat March poster (see fig.9) stated sharam-o-hayya kapron ma nhy soch ma (trans. dignity is not in clothing but it is in the approach of thinking), this poster and similar ones were disparaged for ridiculing Islamic instructions regarding proper clothing for women, especially hijab.

⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-60388311>



Figure 9: <https://celebritykahani.blogspot.com/2020/03/aurat-march-2020-unbelievable-posters.html>

Minister for Religious Affairs Noorul Haq Qadri wrote to then Prime minister of the country to ban the women's march and to celebrate women's day as Hijab Day. The minister wrote in his letter: 'We all accept that Islam offers a complete code of life ... No organization should be allowed to question or ridicule Islamic values...hijab or the modesty of Muslim women at the Aurat March' (Ali, 2022). Many people made similar problematic interpretation of simple posters that asked to abstain from victim blaming. In Aurat march 2022, to counter such interpretations, participants of the march held actual clothing items in which they were raped, assaulted, or harassed (see fig.10).



Figure 10: <https://mmnews.tv/aurat-march-2021-these-clothes-highlight-sexual-abuse-within-a-family/>

Most of the clothing items displayed were completely aligned with Islamic dress code and yet girls as young as nine years old were assaulted in completely covered clothing by people who were closely related to them. The marchers highlighted the idea that their fight is not against what women should wear but against the lack of legislation to try the offenders in the court of law and against society that blames the victims. In 2021, Lahore chapter of Aurat march demanded to maintain national sex offenders list, to ensure establishing of sexual harassment committees at hospitals and to raise minimum age to 18 to avoid forced child marriages, it also demanded to widen the scope of workplace harassment law (Kalachelvam & Ahmed, 2021).

One poster (see fig.11) that was propagated to be ridiculing Islamic values said, ‘agr dupatta etna pasand ha tu ankhon pa bandh lo’ (trans. If you like fabric head cover/hijab so much, wrap it around your eyes). In Islamic law females are

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bound to cover their hair and this poster was considered to demean the Islamic instruction. The marchers, however, wanted men to own their responsibility, in street harassment cases, by not ogling at women, a common practice in Pakistani society (Akhtar et al., 2021). Wrapping the fabric around eyes means that men should follow the Quranic instruction of lowering their gaze around women and not policing women about what to wear or how to act to keep the men from acting inappropriately (Akhtar et al.,2021).



Figure 11: <https://www.mediabites.com.pk/27-Mar-2021/court-orders-investigation-against-organizers-of-aurat-march>

Another poster (see fig.12) that irked many for apparently being against Islamic values was ‘Aurat bacha paida krnay ki machine nhy ha’ (trans. A woman is not a child making machine). Many religious scholars, in Pakistan, promote the

idea that women's prime duty is to bear children and nurse and no family planning should be conducted keeping one's means in mind. Though almost 38% of kids under the age of 5 are under weight and majority of mothers remain malnourished (Maccarthy, 2011). According to UNFP Pakistan website, globally Pakistan has 3rd highest maternal and child mortality ratio. Almost 14000 women die yearly during childbirth, making one pregnant woman dying every 37 minutes during labor (Qaisar, 2017). And the mentioned numbers are of just death ratio, excluding the pregnancy complications, serious health issues to mothers and new born babies. It is due to these alarming ratios that women marchers are forcing for women reproductive rights.



Figure 12: <https://www.mediabites.com.pk/27-Mar-2021/court-orders-investigation-against-organizers-of-aurat-march>

A religious scholar, Mohammad Zakaria of Lahore's Jamia Islamia, the oldest Islamic school of city, said that modern family planning ways are western and un-Islamic, adding that poverty should not be a reason to avoid bearing kids because God provides resources for all people (Maccarthy, 2011). The country's obsession with male child forces women to have continued pregnancies until bearing a male heir to the family. Such religious interpretations and societal pressures are keeping women's health at serious risk and many religious scholars are not helping at all to address the matter. According to a research study, many rural men do not use contraceptives due to religious reasons and many women avoid family planning believing it to be against religious instruction (Mir and Shaikh, 2013). Therefore, posters like the one mentioned above are asking for social awareness and laws to protect women reproductive rights and rights over their own body.

Conclusion

The posters that promote breaking of the stereotypes and gender roles are simply subverting the established patriarchal narrative. And since this narrative, that men are supreme, is ancient, deep rooted in society and culture and even fully internalized by Pakistani women themselves, these posters appear unsettling, vulgar, and unreal. Men are considered the prime authority in Pakistani society and women are assigned to be their subordinates (Ali et al., 2011). According to

the detailed experimental research, *Gender Roles and Their Influence on Life Prospects for Women in Urban Karachi, Pakistan: A Qualitative Study* conducted by a group of multiple researchers, Pakistani gender roles are based on the concept of ‘production and reproduction’ and a good woman must earn certain traits. A good woman manages all house chores, takes care of her children, her husband, in laws, controls her emotions and if needed also provides external income. One informant, mentioned in this article, openly accepted that men are women’s owners, and a good wife should always seek husband’s approval for anything (Ali et al., 2011). This study concluded that there are serious inequalities residing in Pakistani gender roles which are deeply exploitive to women. With such internalization of male centric ideas women speaking for themselves appear vulgar and a threat to social fabric.

Bina Shah (2019), one of the core organizers of the Aurat March, in response to the hate and allegations towards posters said that the slogans and signs ‘may appear crude to some but many were witty, funny, clever, sarcastic, and some were very touching and straightforward.’ Another organizer, as mentioned by The Dawn newspaper, the top English newspaper of the country, said that some posters might violate the common moral norms of the country but the media’s ‘obsession’ with harmless posters over ‘real’ news is baffling. In the same piece of The Dawn Newspaper, it is mentioned that the activists would not

be dictated by patriarchy as to what is real and what is unreal feminism (Khatri, 2019).

Pakistani women's march is undeniably questioning the conventional prevalent mindset that 'women are less rational' or 'lack agency' (Adeed & Anwar, 2022). Posters that look like a crusade against Islamic instructions are speaking against male interpretation of religion. Women are demanding change not just in the mindset but also in interpretation of religion, which has largely remained the realm of male Muslim scholars. Pakistani society is deeply driven by religion and some of the earliest prominent Muslim scholars that interpreted religious instructions asserted patriarchy and provided gendered explanation of morality (Adeed & Anwar, 2022). Imam Ghazali, for instance, one of the most revered Muslim scholars of 11th century pronounced marriage to be an enslavement for women, where women must submit themselves in their entirety. Zahra Ayubi (2019) in her book *Gendered Morality: Classical Islamic Ethics of the Self, Family and Society* mentions that despite the presence of 'radical notions of equality in early Islamic sources' prominent Muslim scholars provided their biased male centred interpretations of Islamic laws and teachings. Such religious notions are prevalent in all Muslim countries till date; arguments by these prominent scholars are than used to justify control over women's will and utter spite is thrown in case of any antipatriarchal efforts.

Growing intensity in the posters' narratives, in each year's march, for independence, vengeance against patriarchy and social and political system is because Pakistani women have largely been disappointed by political parties, which have not just remained silent over Aurat march and the heinous campaigns against it, but also in terms of their lack of proactivity towards legislation. Most political parties do not have women centric narrative or demands in their charters. Pakistan People's Party (PPP), though, have rendered its support to Aurat March consistently, the chairperson of party and prominent female representatives has out rightly criticized the efforts of banning the march but PPP in its ruling tenure has not done enough in terms of women protection and empowerment laws.

Media, especially mainstream media, works on capitalist motives; it sells what is popular. The media sells the popular patriarchal narratives because it easily sets with the masses and consumed without friction or resistance. Aurat march is not a good selling product, it is disruptive to the strongly knitted societal narrative, therefore, mainstream media and many analysts, with fundamentalist mindset, not only disapprove of the movement but run rigorous, hateful, and organized campaigns against the messages of Aurat March posters.

The detailed analysis of posters very clearly informs us that the ideas conveyed are harmless and words on these posters are either expressive of anger and injustice or rightful demands for justice. Pakistani feminists, therefore, for

sure have a very long, volatile, and tumultuous road ahead of them to even make the masses, especially common women, understand the importance of the movement. Pakistani women rights' marchers are rejecting the social taboos and making a visible effort to be visible by occupying public spaces (Zubair, 2022: 317).

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