

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Asia > Pakistan > Women (Pakistan) > Women, fundamentalism (Pakistan) > **Pakistan: argument around Women's Day March still hasn't died down**

Pakistan: argument around Women's Day March still hasn't died down

Wednesday 27 March 2019, by [KHALID Haroon](#) (Date first published: 21 March 2019).

Television anchors have dedicated complete shows to what they describe as the 'dishonourable' and 'objectionable' posters that were displayed at the event.

It has been over a week since the Aurat March took place in Pakistan, when thousands of women hit the streets to demand equality and gender justice on International Women's Day on March 8.

The controversy around the march, however, refuses to die down. Its organisers have said they have [received several death and rape threats on social media](#) over the event, and on March 12, a legislator from the Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal, a coalition of politico-religious parties [threatened to file a first information report](#) against them, for "disrespecting" women and the "ideology and Constitution of Pakistan".

Many of these politico-religious parties, in past years, have rejected Pakistan's Domestic Violence Bill calling it "anti-Islam". In a contradiction of sorts, many of these parties, such as the Jamaat-e-Islami, also have vibrant women's wings that are actively involved in their politics and activism.

While Pakistan continues to reel from an economic crisis, a tense standoff with India, and other numerous problems, popular television anchors have dedicated complete shows to what they describe as the "dishonourable" and "objectionable" posters that were displayed at the event.

Here is a sample of some of the slogans on the posters that have upset several people in Pakistan:

"Khana garam kardoongi, bistar khud garam lo."
I'll warm up the food, you warm up the bed yourself.

"Tu kare to stud, mein karoon to slut"
If you do it, you are a stud, if I do it, I am a slut

Other posters brought out in the open that taboo subject: women's monthly periods.

While religious political parties had a predictable response to the march, the reaction of the country's celebrities – such as some of its actors and singers – was disappointing. In their tweets and comments on television, they said they supported women's rights but were ashamed at the language used during the march.

The criticism from political parties and celebrities had a central theme: that women face far more important problems in Pakistan – so-called honour killings, educational inequality, domestic and

other forms of violence. The argument is that these problems must be addressed first before women's rights activists can talk of the issues highlighted at the women's march, such as gender justice, which were deemed less important.

This criticism has failed to recognise that the root of almost all violence against women lies in attempts by men to define and control the sexuality of women.

It is free sexual expression, arguably the ultimate form of freedom, which has the potential to address structural forms of discrimination against women. But free sexual expression is also what seems to have upset many critics of the women's march.

The categorisation of the problems facing women in Pakistan as "more important" and "less important" is therefore a false one. There is no hierarchy here. Rather, these problems are inter-linked: it is not possible to address one, without addressing the other.

Western women and Pakistan

As the women's march continues to be discussed as one of the most pressing issues facing Pakistan, I am reminded of another interesting phenomenon related to the problems facing women in this country.

In past years, there has been a succession of white women who have taken upon themselves the responsibility of representing the "true image of Pakistan" to the West. These women attempt to show that Pakistan is safe for white women, and by extension for all women, despite evidence to the contrary from women who actually live in this country.

Last November, for instance, a few photographs of American filmmaker and public relations consultant Cynthia D Ritchie cycling on the roads of Peshawar went viral. These photos were captioned to show that the [city was safe even for a "white woman" to cycle around](#).

Ironically, a few months later, in January, a [women's bicycle rally scheduled to take place in Peshawar](#) had to be cancelled after threats from political parties. It seemed as if Peshawar was safe just for "white women".

[Eva Zu Beck](#) is another white woman who has gained popularity for attempting to project a positive image of Pakistan to the world. The Polish travel vlogger's popularity on social media earned her an [official gig with a leading Pakistani media organisation](#) in December. She has been tasked with uncovering [Pakistan's undiscovered beauty](#). One telecom corporation has even invited her to represent Pakistan in the US.

It is strange how the people who seemed to be losing their sanity upon seeing Pakistani women participating in the Aurat March have praised these non-Pakistani women for representing the so-called "true image" of the country.

How is it possible to understand this phenomenon?

The theory of Orientalism - which critiques the West's representations of the East as one that either privileges the Western over the Eastern or idealises the East - might be useful in attempting to understand it.

After all, by idealising Pakistan for a western audience, travellers such as Cynthia D Ritchie and Eva Zu Beck, are doing just that.

But then this is not simply about theories of representation. In attempting to project Pakistan as a women-friendly place, they are denying the fact that women in this country face real problems, many of which threaten their very lives.

Haroon Khalid is the author of four books, including Imagining Lahore and Walking with Nanak.

Haroon Khalid

[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

Scroll.in, March 21, 2019

<https://scroll.in/article/916950/critics-of-pakistans-aurat-march-should-know-the-problems-faced-by-women-are-inter-linked>