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‘Pandemic of patriarchy’: Pakistani women defy threats to hold march

Tuesday 9 March 2021, by [TOPPA Sabrina](#) (Date first published: 8 March 2021).

Healthcare is focus of event to mark International Women’s Day, as organisers say pandemic has led to setbacks in rights

A march during the time of Covid is a difficult thing to plan safely. For Pakistan’s women, determined to have their “Aurat March” today, there are other risks – to their physical safety as well as of online abuse and trolling.

Noor is an organiser for this year’s masked nationwide rallies. She said she could not give her surname for fear of reprisals over her work.

“The pandemic has hindered mobilisation significantly,” said Noor, who added that the closure of public transport alone has been a huge obstacle to women in the country. But it is the healthcare crisis that is the focus of this year’s marches in Pakistan to mark International Women’s Day.

The event is being organised online as well as on the streets, with organisers encouraging women to stay at home if the health risks outweigh the benefits. Those who do take to the streets are being asked to wear political slogans on their masks.

Online, women are using the hashtag [#PatriarchyKaPandemic](#) (“Patriarchy’s Pandemic”) to mobilise women and call out everyday violence against women by “airing dirty laundry”, said Noor. During the pandemic Pakistan has seen a sharp rise in domestic violence cases, along with an increased burden of domestic and care work imposed on working women.

With about [600,000](#) Covid-19 cases in Pakistan, this year’s [manifesto](#) for the march is markedly different from previous years’ because of the increased focus on health. Women are calling on the government to increase the health budget to 5% of GDP; implement a Covid-19 plan for women and minorities; tackle violence against women; assign equal recognition to women’s labour; and allocate more health resources for women and transgender people.

In recent weeks, Noor has organised medical camps to speak to poorer Pakistani women about the health issues in their marginalised communities, most of which are linked to water and sanitation. Pakistan has among the world’s worst access to safe water, with almost [80%](#) of the population unable to access clean drinking water.

“You realise how inaccessible and unaffordable healthcare is for a lot of communities,” Noor said. “I might have access to healthcare, but they won’t.”

Muqaddas Afzal, 25, vice-president of a group called the Progressive Students’ Collective in Lahore, said the pandemic had further exposed economic and social injustices. “It has also taught us that the pandemic of patriarchy is far worse than the Covid pandemic. Covid will be eradicated, but what

about patriarchy?”

“It’s a very timely theme,” said digital rights activist Nighat Dad. “In the pandemic, women’s health problems have come before everyone. I would call it a health emergency, to be very honest.”

This is evident in the country’s maternal mortality statistics: [140 maternal deaths per 100,000 births](#). Nearly half of Pakistani mothers [face](#) malnutrition and almost 40% of children under five are [stunted](#).

Women are also calling for a fairer Covid-19 vaccine rollout in Pakistan, one of the few countries that has [allowed](#) private companies to import vaccines without price caps, exacerbating social inequalities.

The pandemic has “unravelling many myths” about policies, said Zainab Najeeb, 28, who teaches gender and feminism at Lahore University of Management Sciences. Najeeb said women have faced a significant rise in care work at home, exacerbated by the increase in domestic violence.

An organiser of the march in Islamabad, Tooba Syed, said: “The fight against patriarchy is a fight for recognition of care work and women’s role in social reproduction.”

In the early days of the virus, female health workers who took part in door-to-door mass awareness campaigns about Covid-19 faced hostility and violence. “As domestic violence increased during the pandemic, the lady health workers were the only form of care available to survivors of domestic violence,” said Syed. “They’re the backbone of the public health system of the country.”

Organisers are also calling for universal access to contraception and safe family planning, said Noor. “Our healthcare system doesn’t believe that women can make their own decisions. That’s our cultural mindset – there are so many hindrances and limits on women’s decision-making. We have to march, and we have to keep working on this movement.

“When we march, we see a lot of women on the streets. It’s liberating and gives you a lot of hope. You see how many women are together in this and you see a hope for a change.”

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