

Pakistan: Where is the Aurat March heading?

Tuesday 21 June 2022, by [ZIA Afiya S.](#) (Date first published: 7 March 2022).

The Aurat Marches have brought forth an entirely young leadership and a rude breaking of the silence on sexuality. But what next?

Since 2018, the Aurat March annual events have reclaimed the public spaces across different cities of Pakistan and have provoked political reaction, inspired scholarly papers, and stirred donor research interest.

But four years on, have they achieved tangible political outcomes, and can these be expected to graduate into a movement that is relevant to the political climate while measuring progress against the many demands laid out in its yearly manifestoes?

The Government of Pakistan, the Jamaat-e-Islami, Women's Action Forum and many NGOs have been celebrating international women's day for decades. However, two key contributions of the Aurat March to the spectrum of women's movements have been the emergence of an entirely young leadership and a rude breaking of the silence on sexuality — a subject which it planted onto the public agenda. It has done so in bold, creative and voluntary ways rather than being politically motivated or project-driven.

The Aurat March marks a clear generational shift — as younger women lead this wave — but some internal differences have emerged over the past few years which betray strategic confusion and ideological departures. Additionally, by staying restricted as annual events, the Aurat March risks stagnation. To prevail, a committed vision is required with strategic aims and roadmaps because already the Aurat March's edge has been blunted by successive backlash from multiple fronts.

Clerics and conservatives have taken deep offence to the Aurat March while the pietist women's movements have flouted their docile image and launched an unprecedented direct confrontation with their own alternative, the Haya Marches.

Many disapproving liberals too, despair of the excessively confrontational tone of the Aurat March and resultant 'extremes' on both sides. An anxious state wishes to evade conflict and is wary of the Aurat March allegedly promoting 'foreign agendas'. The Shuhada Foundation of the Lal Masjid has even [petitioned against these 'cultural assassins' and 'Lord Macaulay's class'](#). This narrows the representational appeal of Aurat March politics to progressive or radical sectors but for some cities, such alienation does not suit their ideological endgame.

The Aurat March has been extensively documented in a celebratory manner but critical analysis has been resisted or petulantly received. In 2018, after the first Aurat March event, several younger organisers were offended by critical observations about its disengagement with the state and ambiguity over the role of religion and piety; its selectivity in call-outs, dependence on social media rather than political purpose and its expectations of justice for sexual misconduct but without engaging with legal structures. Social media feminists fuelled the outrage (always with male commentators piling on) and while many from the older generation maintained a diplomatic silence, a few years on, several senior feminists echoed the exact same concerns.

In 2020, Rubina Saigol and Nida Usman Chaudhry pointed to some of the [historic tensions within the Aurat March](#), including the role of NGOs, the issues of generational differences and inclusion of themes of sexual orientation.

Like previous critical analyses, they note that the core concerns over political goals and religion had been evaded. Their study cites several feminists from an older generation who support and participate in the Aurat March but critique the new wave feminists for not challenging the state, laws and policies. Some conclude that this is “a manifestation of individualism which characterises the neo-liberal ethos” and even express doubt that the current method of annual events will ever qualify as a movement.

Structures

Aurat March was conceived by its founders in Karachi and the event of 2018 inspired and included several activists from across the country who initiated similar events in their cities in subsequent years. While Karachi, Lahore and Multan organise the event as ‘Aurat March’, Hyderabad, Islamabad, Mardan, and Quetta have organised their protests under the banner of ‘Aurat Azadi March’ but not by any joint consensus.

Hyderabad and Quetta are the outliers within the Aurat March sisterhood since their city marches are organised by members of the Women’s Action Forum (WAF). WAF’s political outlook is holistic; its strategies are driven by its secular ideology, and lobbying and pressure is directed towards change from the state. WAF’s structure evolved over its early years of formation but is organically anchored around an ideological charter to which all members are bound and, while sister chapters in other cities retain some organisational and strategic autonomy, national issues require consensus.

Institutional memory and years of experience qualifies the Hyderabad Aurat March as the most constant and politically effective. Quetta’s challenge comes from the state tactic of infiltrating informers into any civil society movement in an assumed bid to crush any possible dissent.

The Aurat March committees across the country are loosely knit and there is no coherent vision or thematic uniformity and city events are not required to adhere to specific organisational rules. This affords flexibility but also, some confusion.

The involvement of NGOs and the role of the Women Democratic Front (WDF) associated with the political party, the Awami Workers Party, in the Aurat March events have had mixed results. Saigol and Chaudhry point out how older generations urge the Aurat March to graduate from an annual event to a sustained struggle for social change arguing that, “This neglect separates the personal from the political even though one of the main ideas propounded by the marchers is that the personal is ultimately the political.”

Some Aurat Marches have resisted the involvement of political parties altogether, while Hyderabad has always invited political parties, and the Islamabad Aurat Azadi March has been organised by the WDF that is associated with the AWP. However, even in the latter cases, there are strong contrasts in their principle of ‘engaging’ with mainstream political parties.

Hyderabad’s method of engagement is instructive as they invite parties and NGOs to a carefully curated event which does not eclipse the feminist hosts. They report that this year, discouraged by vigilant agencies, NGOs and some progressive political groups have only extended solidarity rather than organisational assistance. This only confirms the Hyderabad Aurat March’s belief in the need for an autonomous feminist movement that is not dependent on other platforms but pushes the state to be responsible.

Secular political parties have to be allies in order to resist the religious right and to integrate the feminist agenda into the national political landscape. Meanwhile, the Islamabad Aurat Azadi March has included political party members in their organisational set-up — including men who wield some decision-making powers. The inclusion of ‘male allies’ or ‘male feminists’ is also a departure from WAF’s policies — one that Hyderabad finds to be an anomaly in a nascent feminist movement.

The Hyderabad organisers understand the pragmatic need for political parties’ support for a show of strength in numbers and for political legitimacy for their long-term activism. However, they do not interface with the right-wing parties due to WAF’s secular principle and because they consider religious parties to be antithetical and oppositional to their feminist cause. One leader in Hyderabad advises that, “the right-wing are more powerful — there’s no shame in conceding that but just don’t organise naively, thinking faith-based politics is benign or that their women are docile and are going to convert to feminism.”

The members of Hyderabad WAF/Aurat March are neither secular elites nor disconnected liberals, which have been excuses used by some left liberals in order to feign proletariat politics and as a bid to reject secular resistance while inching closer to appeasing Islamist politics. Even this affect is an untested pledge because when the [Aurat Azadi March mural in Islamabad was vandalised](#) by pious objectors in 2020, no efforts were made to dialogue with the devout, or to argue a feminist exegesis to defend the offensive slogans or negotiate over the demands for sexual freedoms.

Many such claims on social media have not translated into practical results and have opened the question of whether left feminists are now advocating the embrace of Islamic feminism? If so, this is an interesting revisitation of something already tried in the 1980s/90s, but most other Marchers seem to be stressing on bodily autonomy that labours for wages and resists violence and do not see these struggles from the prism of divine sensibilities. They do not pretend that empowerment in the praxis of virtue and piety do not limit or oppose the goals of feminist transformation.

Slogans

In a way, the Aurat March events resonate with the protest rallies of the Women’s Action Forum from the 1980s. But while the WAF targeted the state for criminalising sexual relations, the protests of the Aurat March against sexual harassment and for bodily rights have been mainly focused at private institutions and social relationships. The inclusion and expression of queer communities also varies and has been deeply debated in some cities but outside of the larger metropolises, these are not always well-organised groups and so, the inclusion of transgender activists and sexual minorities tends to be token. In Multan, however, the Aurat March has consciously included transgender rights activists on its platform.

Sexuality has been a missing link in WAF’s activism and in some chapters it was the murder of Qandeel Baloch that sparked a debate over sexpositivity, followed by inter-generational study circles to educate members about the intersectionality of sexuality with race, class and gender politics. The place of sexualities in political activism within both generations or waves remains fairly gridlocked.

This was revealed in the outcry after the 2019 Aurat March, when several activists [publicly shamed Kishwar Naheed](#) for her criticism of the tone of sexual impropriety that characterised the March. But in subsequent years, many radicals have themselves taken a defensive tone in the media.

Many have reinterpreted the ‘offensive’ slogans and posters by sanitising the advocacy of sexual choice completely and subsumed these demands as calls for protection from violence and about labour rights. This is strategically fine, except that over-correctives can cause more damage. Reinterpreting the demand for women’s right to sexual autonomy and preferences voids its radical

potential. But since the Aurat March has no ideological response to religious objections on how sex is prohibitive and subject to prescriptive reproductive marriage, the defence has been to redefine autonomy and preference as protection from violence — something even the Jamaat-e-Islami fully agrees with and so, stipulates the body's fate to divine rules and the prevalent sexual order — *mera jism, Allah ki marzi*.

Lahore and Karachi note that they maintain allegiance to the slogan of 'mera jism, meri marzi' and the other 'controversial' poster messages. They report how they demystify the demand for bodily choice, consent, and freedom and they interpret this as the right of refusal from sexual and reproductive coercion and harassment. However, as pedantic clerics repeat on different media outlets, if the slogan is so ambiguous and requires so many clarifications, then why use such a contentious message at all?

Staking your claim over radical turf and forfeiting secular signifiers opens up an impasse that the right wing will always occupy and dominate. This year, the Islamabad Aurat Azadi March has gone one step further and conceded this space quite literally.

Strategies

In wake of the backlash and falsified blasphemy allegations from last year, the Aurat Azadi March in Islamabad decided to hold a *jalsa* in a park this year, instead of a street protest or march. Several older activists in Islamabad felt this amounted to retreat and would be taken as a sign of concession and right-wing vindication.

□ Date Change Announcement!

The Aurat Azadi Jalsa in Islamabad will now be held on Sunday, 6th March. Here's why: [#AuratAzadiJalsa2022 pic.twitter.com/5eVPITPNTH](https://pic.twitter.com/5eVPITPNTH)

— Aurat Azadi March Islamabad (@AuratAzadiMarch) [February 25, 2022](#)

In a remarkable effort of mobilisation and tireless volunteerism, these activists have seamlessly picked up the mantle and organised the Aurat March Islamabad to fill the void. Hyderabad, Karachi and Lahore are equally impressed by this move and organisers in other cities concur and argue that it would have been better to not hold any *jalsa* or event at all, rather than privatise a street protest and retract the very public claim that was the Aurat March's original purpose.

The attempt to redefine withdrawal as a 'silent protest' or insist that silence IS a protest, is a bumper sticker response and again, these decisions require more thoughtful and strategic political responses, not peevish ones. It also doesn't work well to claim exceptional danger or injury, since most veterans have now been part of countless risky cases and have been at the receiving end of threats, lost career opportunities, or suffered some financial, personal and political fallout far more than freshly minted activists could begin to imagine.

Many argue that the political climate of Pakistan is the worst ever, which is strange given that less than a decade ago, bombings in every city were regular fare and yet feminists fully participated in the lawyers' movement protests, risking arrests and careers. Throughout the War on Terror years of bombings and visits by agencies, the older feminists had only one advice for an emerging generation of activists — 'don't be divided' and 'don't be scared because hound-dogs can smell fear'.

Remarkably, and a testament to the commitment and political acumen of some experienced

feminists, Islamabad/Pindi has managed to mobilise young activists across the capital and fill in the vacuum of the Aurat Azadi March by organising a whole new Aurat March Islamabad in just a few weeks. This is evidence of the growth of feminist activism across the country and to which NGOs, Aurat March and gender studies — with all the contradictions — have contributed considerably and which WAF has inspired fundamentally.

Each city's political preconditions influence their strategic engagement with the state and determines their mobilisation methods. Hyderabad reports that they never canvassed provocative posters since they understand the political milieu and because femicide is the most pressing challenge they face. So, violence against women is the primary lens through which they conduct their campaign.

Despite each city committee's pledge to the slogan of '*mera jism meree marzi*' and other provocative and satirical agitprops, the original claim of Aurat March about undisciplined bodies, defiant language and free expression has been successively invalidated over the years, as these have become schooled and policed — evident in the diluted slogans, posters and pragmatic manifesto demands.

Despite their impressive defiance to the escalating backlash and opposition by women of the Haya March in 2020, the Aurat March events that were held in 2021 had lesser numbers and carried far more stoic messages. This can partially be attributed to pandemic constraints but this did not hold back the right-wing groups who opposed the events and [registered false blasphemy charges](#) against organisers in some cities. Dialling back can mitigate but also blunts resistance and can leave movements hanging in activist purgatory.

The weaponising of religion should not have been a surprise for anyone who understands Pakistan. Those who fumed at the mention of oppositions and who raged behind theories of pietist women's agency, looked like the proverbial deer caught in headlights when the Aurat March mural was attacked in 2020 and when they were hounded by the media in 2021.

There was no strategy to deal with this, which was always going to be difficult due to the pietist climate enabled by the PTI and the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan footprint. However, this is a major lapse on the part of those feminists who have insisted that there is 'a complex relationship between pietist women's bodily practices and interior meanings' and that it was important to engage with these in order to devise better feminist strategies. It would be pertinent to ask, how that's turning out?

Social media

The tool of social media has afforded the #MeToo movement to go 'viral' globally and gathered some critical mass of courageous voices who revealed their experiences of sexual offences. But after the very first wave of backlash, it was clear that internal contradictions and unpreparedness for entering 'the field' could not withstand the offline encounter with the state, legal and social conservatism, or, pietist politics. The citing of 'successful' cases due to social media activism is unfortunate, when activists working on the same factory case or on violence cases in courts refute the definition of this success and attest to continued violations in the very same cases. Social media attention repeats offline biases too, where some rape cases on motorways are amplified while others are completely eclipsed.

Other than the limits of social media as a means but not an end or dispenser of social justice, there are other connected concerns about this neoliberal tool. The internalisation of corporate ethos and sponsored festivals have infested so deeply, that some members have even claimed copyrights to

brand 'Aurat March'.

The slogans related to sexual autonomy threaten the sexual and gendered orders of Pakistan and the original sin of challenging these will always remain the identity of the Aurat March, regardless of any number of multi-issue manifestos that it releases. This is not peculiar to women's causes — no one reads the manifestos of mainstream political parties either.

The only relevant issue is how the Aurat March decides to claim its identity and which vision it settles on and strategies it adheres to for the future. WAF's charter summarises all of these in two paragraphs and has remained its guiding vision. Along with its principles of collective meetings and consensus-based decision-making, these factors retain its place as the vanguard of Pakistan's women's movements.

Sukoon and security

Over the past four years, illegal disappearances continue unabated, as do blasphemy-related lynchings; military supremacy has ascended while democratic spaces have been stifled. Pietist women have become empowered to pitch an unprecedented offensive against feminists and they are supported by a government that promotes peak piety as its policy and is reinforced by a misogynist media that glorifies women's domestication.

Women journalists are targeted and trolled, the PM and police chief blame women victims for sex crimes, judges acquit murderers who kill for honour despite the amended law and cybercrime laws such as PECA are a direct threat to the very tool of social media that younger activists depend on for campaigning against all of the above.

All this, yet the slogan for several of this year's Marches calls for *tahaffuz* [protection] and *sukoon* [peace] for women, channeling the Jamaat e Islami's slogan for this year's International Women's Day — '*mehfooz aurat*'.

The right-wing is ideologically clear in that the source of women's security lies in the family and domestic sphere and that their organised political party with its gender apartheid agenda is the pathway to achieving this goal.

Meanwhile, other than with Hyderabad, it is unclear if the Aurat March's demands for security are directed against or from the state, and whether the longer vision is for all the city's Marches to converge into a separate political party or, to support the AWP or, remain altogether aloof from national formal politics and persist as a performative annual event.

As the founders, the Karachi Aurat March organisers are thinking ahead and are aware of the lack of national political coherence. They say they are committed to transitioning towards a political party and that each year's activities mobilise women, test themes, and gather momentum.

The trouble is that the Islamabad Aurat Azadi March already has a political party base and if they have sat out this year's March, and if Karachi is not looking to merge or ally with the AWP, then it's not just fissures in strategies but even visionary differences that seem to be splintering further, rather than coalescing towards a national women's politics.

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