

Sisters In Solidarity: Reflections On Aurat March And Struggle For Reconciliation Between Feminism And Society

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Article Information

Abstract

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This paper evaluates how feminism in modern-day Pakistan has been curtailed from its inception to contemporary times. It analyzes the origins of feminism and contemporary feminism, which have raised awareness regarding many prejudiced notions in the patriarchal structure within Pakistan. Qualitative, multilingual, semi-structured interviews were conducted via cell phone to collect research data. The interviews took about 20-30 minutes. The interviewees were asked about their interactions with the March, how it resonated with them, and how they felt expressing themselves in a men-dominated space. This article concludes with a discussion of the tactical and strategic effects of the *Aurat March* after its organization and its role in the overall landscape of national social movements. The research has highlighted the contextual differences between Western feminism and women's rights laws in a local religio-cultural backdrop. These findings have implications for understanding contemporary feminist scholarship in Pakistan.

1.Introduction

Pakistan's Aurat March (Women March), launched by a group of progressive feminists collective Hum Auratein (We the Women), coincided with International Women's Day, March 08, 2018. The march pushed for stringent liabilities for crimes of violence against women and support and rehabilitation for women who have experienced such in public spaces, at home, and in the workplace. This article enters the debate around feminism from the perspective of Aurat March- a movement originating in Pakistan against the milieu of hard-core and inveterate socio-religious/ political patriarchal structures of Pakistani society. This research article delves into the manifestoes and impacts of the Aurat March as a one-of-a-kind movement in Pakistan and the controversies surrounding it.

1.1 Aurat March (Women March)- Origin and Evolution in Pakistan

In Pakistan, women have to live with much social prejudice, aggressive and sometimes inhumane lifestyles, and toxic discrimination, which deprives them of their fundamental rights resulting in forced or early childhood marriage, lack of essential education opportunities, lack of mobility and access to dignified transportation, lack of safety in public domains, physical and emotional violence at homes, sexual harassment at workplaces plus a considerable wage gap, which vanquishes their freedom of choice and equality under a patriarchal mindset (UN Women Report 2020). Women also

face severe crimes like preemption of rights and revenge schemes (e.g. *wanni swara*), including acid attacks, honor killings, forced marriage, or sexual servitude that are regularly silenced by society and frequently overlooked. Pakistan is ranked the third-worst in the 2020 Gender Gap report, gauging parameters like economic justice, education, health, and political empowerment (World Economic Forum 2020). According to Government of Pakistan data, at least 28 percent of women between 15 and 49 have experienced physical violence, with 40 percent of the men polled agreeing that it was acceptable to beat your wife under certain circumstances. (National Institute of Population Studies 2017-18) They are Showing a grievous gender situation in Pakistan.

With launching a new feminist movement on the horizon parallel to the #MeToo movement taking place internationally, a young and vital women's collective challenged the current social order with the help of social media by putting forth a charter of demands for equal rights for women served as a mouthpiece for the marginalized communities of transgender people and religious and ethnic minorities.

1.2 Socio-Political Fabric of Society and Rising Women's Movements

After gaining independence from the British, Pakistan emerged as a Muslim-majority state. Hence, religion became the cornerstone of Pakistani Identity, and it assumed that the nations would take the same view of amalgamating their nationality with Islam (Dhulipala, 2015). Nevertheless, after the partition, religion was used as a tool to do oppressive legislation for underprivileged segments, mainly women. Anyone straying from the path faced severe consequences. *Aurat March's* demands represent a divergence on this path to legislation, resulting in the intense and often violent reaction faced by protesters each year by the politico-religious groups that have taken a firm stance that *Aurat March* is a paid propaganda by the 'secular, immoral' women at the behest of West. They are here to promote the Western agenda of vulgarity and immorality.

In the mid-1970, the regime declared to lead the country according to its inception philosophy [وفاقی] and was labeled as the most responsible for the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the country (Haqqani 2010). This religious drive further victimized the weaker segments of society, i.e., women and religious minorities. As mentioned earlier, the trends severely affected Pakistan's socio-political fabric. Afterward, the regime kept trying to balance Islam and democracy. However, the legacy was too strong to overcome a system of punishments and persecution (Talbot, 1998).

Saigol (2016) and Jamal (2005) discussed how women's empowerment is severely hindered by a deep-rooted colonial mindset fueled by the war against terrorism and the wave of religious intolerance. Jamal (2005) has also discussed the politico-religious movements in Pakistan that favor undermining women. She has also discussed how the powerful societal alliances in Pakistan have a history of enfeebling women and other religious minorities for their gains by subjectively interpreting divine scriptures (Jamal, 2016).

The *Aurat March* created a radical divide between traditional and progressive schools in Pakistan. The participants and organizers of the *Aurat March* countenanced astronomical backlash from the old school and traditional factions of the society, from social media harassment to death and rape threats after the march and labeled as *un-Islamic* (Zehra, 2019). Many others thought that the organizers were going too fast, too soon for the conservative groups to digest and unlearn the toxicity taught to them by society and the culture (Asher, 2020). Many argued that the marchers were lascivious and salacious opportunists who had offended the conservative values of a Muslim-majority state and enfeebled a fair fight for rights with an unnecessary anti-Islamic agenda (Bari, 2021).

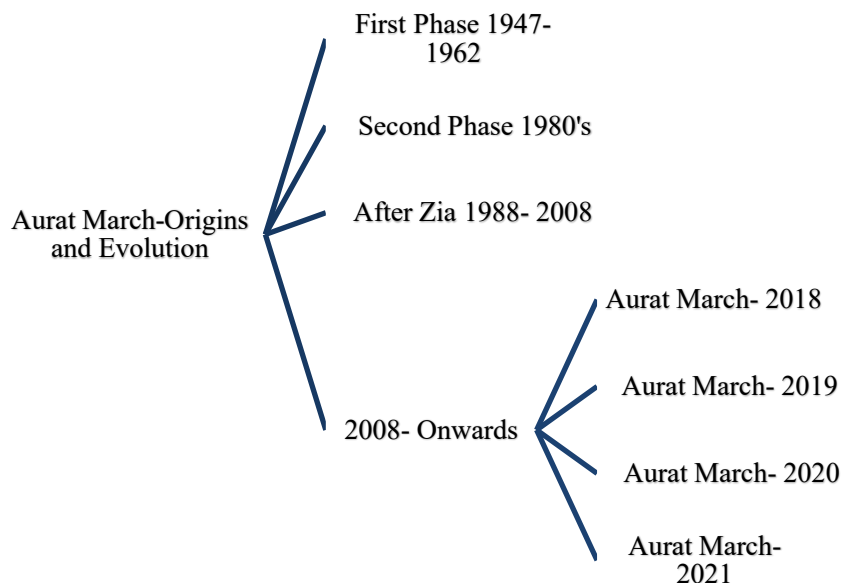
Gender is one of the tenets of Pakistani society. Patriarchal values are thoroughly ingrained in every aspect of life, from local traditions and culture to religious doctrines. Islam, being the dominant religion, has vast leverage over determining gender roles. A fine distinction has placed women in only their reproductive roles as mothers and wives, only to be seen in private, and men in a productive role as breadwinners in the public arena (Johanssen et al. 2011). Due to this, women are often held back from obtaining more skills and education, limiting their opportunities and increasing their dependence on men.

Furthermore, many religious and cultural hindrances are put forth in the path of women. This has been going on for an extended period. Consequently, some quarters of the new generation, tired of the antediluvian system and culture, started to organize a modern movement parallel to the international movements of women that started at the beginning of 2017 and started to gain momentum worldwide.

In short, this study revolves around the contemporary women's movements in Pakistan and the impacts on our society in different socio-economic strata.

1.3 Phases of Women's Struggles in Pakistan

Figure 1: Phases and history of Aurat Marches (Women Marches) in Pakistan from 1947-2021



This figure shows the *Aurat March* by a timeline: the historical perspective of women's rights and the contemporary movement. It is a chronology of campaigns and movements that outline, substantiate, and safeguard women's rights in Pakistan. These movements have historically been shaped and respond to the national and global reallocation of leverage and jurisprudence (which involve the war on terror, the #MeToo movement, etc.) (Charania, 2014; Iftikhar, 2012). The inter-relation of the women's movement and the State has manifested from mutual accommodation to outright antagonism.

1.4 2018- onwards

The cities of Karachi and Lahore celebrated the first-ever *Aurat March* on International Women's Day 2018 to highlight women's issues and end sexual harassment and violence (Shah, 2020). They protest and demand better protection laws for women, repealing the archaic rules in the constitution (Asher, 2020).

1.5 Aurat March- 2018

In a first for Pakistan, the march drew crowds of women to Lahore, Islamabad, and Karachi streets. One of the most highlighted issues discussed in March was *KaroKari*,¹. Pakistan has the world's highest incidence of honor killings (Jafri, 2008). Sources disagree about the exact number of honor killings, but Human Rights Watch, NGOs/INGOs reckon that such unreported incidents exceed these numbers significantly. Roughly 500 women are killed by family members who believe their honor has been damaged each year (HRCP, 2018).

1.6 Aurat March- 2019

It was controversial from the get-go. It all started with the controversial slogan "*Mera jism, Meri marzi*" (My Body, My Choice). The marchers said that the discussion of restricted topics like women's rights to their bodies, rape, and marital rape is being discussed for the first time, termed a

¹ An honor killing or shame killing is the murder of a member of a family most often of women by male members justified by saying that the victim has brought dishonor upon the family or community

march's success (Toppa, 2019). Online harassment has gone too far in death and rape threats to the organizers and the marchers (Azeem, 2019).

1.7 Aurat March- 2020

The March is already under doubt due to the raging COVID-19 pandemic. However, hardline conservatism did criticize the March in mainstream media and on social media. Clerics termed the participants the “*Most evil of women.*” Despite such criticisms from the alt-right, conservatives, and other religious factions, a large crowd, including many men, attended the march to raise awareness about gender discrimination in Pakistan (Zehra, 2019).

1.8 Aurat March- 2021

Due to COVID-19, the “Women’s Health Crisis” was identified as the central theme (Current, 2021). Instead of regular street marches, sit-ins were held to protest patriarchal violence with a central demand for the end of the two-finger test and more women and trans women representation in Medico-legal teams in hospitals. Again, critics tried to discredit this March by falsifying information and sending a flurry of disinformation on social media. Hardcore *Aurat March* decriers published a fake video of *Aurat March* slogans to besmirch the movement's causes, and false blasphemy charges were laid on the women activists (Shahid, 2021).

Marchers came out in 2019, 2020, and again in 2021 on the same occasion, making it the first miraculous and perpetual movement in Pakistan. The organizers and participants realized other underlying issues from solid repositioning. They called for inclusive participation from upper-class and middle-class women from urban and rural areas, men, and the transgender community. The *Aurat March* called for support for women from the State and society who experience violence and harassment by security forces in public and private spheres.

Women’s rights movements like the Aurat March are polarizing, misunderstood, and ineffective unless their narrative is changed to integrate the concepts of modernity and Islam. Rahman (1982) noted that bridging the gap between religion and modernity is challenging, though essential. Islamic feminism can act as a joint base for both traditional/ religious groups and more secular groups and help actuate the country to become gender-equal and peaceful.

Women's struggle for social and political justice has been going on for many years. However, in the years that followed the *Aurat March*, women gained significant awareness of their role and importance as political and social actors. While it is far-fetched to claim a de facto connection between the March and the apparent commendation of women, the event certainly drew recognition to women's grievances. It set forth guidelines that helped interpret women’s issues throughout the following year, whether this pinnacle moment in women’s pursuit of demanding socio-political equality signifies a bona fide shift in their outlooks (Shaheed, 2019).

1.9 Study Objectives

1. To analyze the participants' perceptive impacts of contemporary *Aurat March* since 2018 and their far-reaching consequences.
2. To explore participants' views on whether a diverse crowd with distinct interests in religion, social and economic reform, gender, and sexuality mobilize around a shared issue.
3. To analyze the wise role of religion, state, and street power to achieve the set forth demands by *Aurat March*.
4. To discuss the effectiveness of *Aurat March* and the role of social media and traditional media in this regard.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

To uncover the multilayered truth, qualitative research was utilized to obtain participants’ views, perceptions, and experiences about the March. Data were analyzed thematically, following guidelines

developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The themes covered in the schedule were the association of participants with *Aurat March*, the plan of *Aurat March*, their stance on Islamic Feminism and Western Feminism, the backlash they receive from alt-right and conservative Islamist groups, and their plans and hopes about the future of feminism in Pakistan. Online semi-structured interviews were administered to explore critical themes and a standard interview process was adopted to maintain uniformity(Denscombe, 2010).

3.2 Study Sites and Participants

This study was conducted among university students who were *Aurat March* participants. These participants were from Lahore, Islamabad, Peshawar, Quetta, and Dera Ghazi Khan, Pakistan's cities. Participants were from different socio-economic backgrounds, and both genders were represented. Participants in March were between 21 and 35 years old. Many March participants were contacted via cellphone, and only those who volunteered for the interviews were included.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

Each interviewee gave informed consent. Participants could withdraw at any time and were not compelled to answer all the questions. Interviewee confidentiality was observed throughout the study. Interview engagements were booked in advance with those who agreed to participate. Ten participants participated in the survey: eight women and two men. The interviews lasted 20 to 30 minutes and were conducted bilingually in English and Urdu.

3.4 Data Collection

The participants were selected relying on subjective judgment and were purposive. The data were collected from the interviews of the participants (see. Table 1) who participated in the march from 2018-2021. All the interviewees were contacted personally by the researchers. Care has been taken to approach a linguistically, culturally, and socially diverse sample. Hence, participants' demographics mix rural and urban and different ethnicities. The interviews were of various durations and enabled researchers to understand participants' journeys as they narrated. It also allows us to formulate and explain the underlying problems in the *Aurat March*. Information is collected at the beginning of each interview to capture vital demographics such as age, university, faculty, and address (see Table 1).

3.5 Procedure

In this research, the data is analyzed deductively. Deductive analysis was used as it was interpretative and was shaped and informed by pre-existing theories and concepts. The rules of deductive logic are followed to reach conclusions. The interviews were carefully read, examined, and investigated to compose lead-off ideas. A six-step process was conducted for a thematic analysis: the course of action for analysis was followed by familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing them up (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). The social context of participants' thoughts and perceptions was considered during the interpretation.

4. Results

Table 1: Demographic information of study participants (n=10)

S.No	Interviewee	Age (years)	Educational Background	Locale	Gender Spectrum
1	R1H	27	Food Technology	Urban	Woman
2	R2R	23	Psychology	Urban	Woman
3	R3K	22	Economics	Urban	Woman
4	R4M	29	Finance	Urban	Man

5	R5G	22	Agricultural Engineering	Semi-Urban	Woman
6	R6R	24	Micro Biology	Rural	Man
7	R7M	24	Anthropology	Urban	Woman
8	R8B	28	Sociology	Urban	Woman
9	R9S	30	Artist	Urban	Woman
10	R10M	32	Political Science	Semi-Urban	Woman

4.1 Thematic Analysis

4.1.1 Findings from interviews of participants of *Aurat March*

Bringing women to the public sphere was an exciting concept of the *Aurat March*. Women raised and brought up with deeply conservative values were unused to resistance being an option. So, the newly formed *Aurat March* was an extensive social and educational awareness phenomenon.

4.1.2 Awareness Phenomenon

Roughly all the interviewees believe that the foremost benefit of *Aurat March* is that it has succeeded in initiating a national debate about women's equity. It has highlighted issues regarding sexual autonomy and marital rape on the frontline. *Aurat March* has successfully pressured lawmakers and civil society to reform existing laws and pass laws to protect women and other minorities. Reporting issues regarding harassment and violence and awareness in delicate matters like two-finger tests have improved.

4.1.3 Reclaim Public Space

The participants of the *Aurat March* faced colossal reactions from the radical hardline groups of the country, receiving death and rape threats before and after the march as right-wing groups labeled it anti-Islamic. Many from the general public believed that the organizers and supporters of the protest were going faster when society was against it, and it took much time to unlearn society and the culture of patriarchy and male superiority (Asher, 2020). The theme of *Aurat March* revolved around getting women out in the public sphere to highlight the issues. According to an interview with R7M, an Anthropology major from Lahore who was also an organizer/participant of *Aurat March*,

“The whole point of organizing the March on the streets was to show all that the public street is as much our (women’s) property as theirs (the men’s). We have as much right to be free and scatheless on the streets as men, without being stared upon, hooted, razzed, or ridiculed. It is our right to be in public spheres and public offices.”

4.1.5 Societal Backlash

The question of walking the thin line between diametric realms of religion and feminism made an exciting discourse in an interview with R5G, who lives on campus away from her family and belongs to a small town in Pakistan. Belonging to a politico-religious party, her family holds a ‘conventional’ mindset. The role of a woman is severely limited to the household. Thus, while she must visit her family back home, she performs an act. She says,

“Negotiating between religion and feminism can sometimes become tricky. While on campus, I live how I want to, wear what I like, and have a degree of freedom. I have the compunction to act with a certain morality here. However, returning home, I will have to prepare for a performance in front of my family and extended family.”

When the same question was asked to R10M of *Aurat March*, she responded:

‘It is toilsome. People do not hesitate to show their displeasure and disapproval and quickly jump to the wrong ideas. Sometimes, I cannot argue with my family to show them how they misconstrued my point because that is the misogynistic mindset I have grown up with. Furthermore, I see my mother, especially, who wants me to raise my

voice and not because of her fear of getting hurt. So, it is a challenging day in and day out. Every day, I take one step forward and two steps backward. It is an energy drain, no doubt. However, that is how it is. I console myself by thinking I took a few progressive steps at the end of the day. After all, Rome was not conquered in a day.”

This eye-opening interview with R10M showed the difficulties of living in a conservative household with liberal views. For R10M, it is tricky to tread among the thorny and contradictory paths of religion, patriarchy, and feminism. It is challenging to take a passive approach when one cannot be zealous about the cause. Being unequivocal about women’s rights is not an option for such women as it leads to their sequestering, ridicule, and disgrace. It is not far-fetched to assume that sometimes this leads to death, as killing women to protect their so-called honor and traditional authority is justified in this society. By acting acquiescent, she subtly tries to cultivate a change in their mindset.

4.2 Participants’ view

In one of the interviews conducted, R9S, one of the participants in Lahore March, said,

“Aurat March, for me, is a platform to celebrate my womanhood, to realize that I am not the only one who has faced trauma and pain and to share them, to live my life by my own rules without being ridiculed for being more different, to allow autonomy of how I dress and whom I talk to....it has given me the courage to ask for my right to education, mobility, health and emancipation from violence.”

“Bringing about change is never easy, and you open yourself to much censure and ridicule by people who cannot fit you into their desired molds. That is what is happening right now. People cannot understand why women do not subject themselves meekly to their (men’s) superiority. Why do they have to demand their rights when they are everything? However, no matter how much I am abused and ridiculed, I will not back down and keep demanding my rights”, R8B said, an attendee from Karachi and a Sociology Major.

4.3 Role of Social/Media

Sensational media reporting was also one of the major highlights of the 2020 Aurat March. Altered/ doctored videos and images were rampant. There was immense media coverage due to threats received from many right-wing political and religious groups, and there was a lot of live media coverage. However, the participants believed the journalist was there for a juicy story and did not seriously take the women’s march manifesto. R7M, from Islamabad, where the *Aurat March* was also attacked by people of an Islamist Party having strong backing from the State, replied about the media scrutiny as,

“Without reading the charter of demands, they (the media) have created a freak out nationally by spreading fake news and doctored photos. These troll farms have pushed back the just cause of women’s health and safety by their agenda of bigotry.”

“.... Firstly, much time has been spent explaining the placards and the meanings behind them; videos and easy-to-understand short messages have been used to convey the feelings behind every placard and poster that this unending debate must end....” R7M said.

R5G, in reply to this question, said,

“In a country where even men are capsulized by the traditional and hardline hierarchy of authoritative figures, the mere idea that women come out on the streets and exercise their independence and autonomy creates a deep divide and agitation. When they realize how sincere we are to the cause of Women’s emancipation, some conservative media segments will continue to exaggerate reporting.”

She believes that some journalists, by design, have spread blatant untruths regarding the March, which information was then used to attack organizers and participants on social media and even endangered their lives by being labeled as sinful.

On asking an attendee R9S about the slogan of *Mera Jism Meri Marzi* (My body, my choice), she replied by saying,

“The media is already biased and ready to believe the worst of us (participants and organizers of Aurat March). The State uses PEMRA (Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority), FIA (Federal Intelligence Agency), and PTA (Pakistan Telecommunication Authority) as tools to enforce silence. They are not there to help us (the women and other minorities), they do not protect against physical or online violence, but the people or forces who incite such violence are given impunity”.

5. Discussion

Women’s rights remain debatable globally, whether they are discussed within developed economies or in less developed ones. They get even more questionable when religion is thrown into the mix. Conventionalism and patriarchy are cataclysmically dominant throughout. In Pakistan, women are inherent to men, as well as their reputation and honor. Their identity has no meaning and is characterized mainly as mothers, sisters, daughters, or wives. They are in a continuous battle of volition or to behave according to the sovereign’s will for their lives. So, the character of Pakistani women is generated through their performance following their dominants according to Butler’s concept of gender (Butler, 1988). Additionally, feminism and equal representation of women in public and private spheres are far from being accepted in a country deeply entrenched in traditionalism.

Recounting the interviews, it is evident that the Aurat March has provided women with a space to claim sisterhood. This has facilitated their categorization of aims and given them a sense of collective power to bring about change. The women who attended the *Aurat March* conjured a shared momentum of desideration for their freedom of choice and decision-making rights (Basir, 2018).

On religion and feminism, respondents believe this March is not religion and State versus the women, but it instead calls for Islam’s more balanced and reformative stance. They think that rather than distorting the teachings of Islam merely as a system of oppression and punishments, the interpretation must be made in a way that safeguards the rights of the vulnerable. Many poster slogans were called out for provoking during the first two marches. So, upon reflection, *Aurat March* evolved with more refined and subtle slogans that aligned with a more traditional base. As an added precaution, approval from the High Court was also obtained for the new slogans (Bilal 2020).

The reception of *Aurat March* has been mixed and divided. Despite its success in provoking debate, raising awareness concerning gender inequities in Pakistan, and garnering support from home and abroad, the organizers and the movement face significant challenges. While Islamist groups denounce the march’s activists and organizers as immoral or misguided blasphemers, others see the movement as a form of Western cultural imperialism. Connecting the rise of rape incidents to women’s clothing choices demonstrates that the space for advocating for women’s rights in Pakistan is squeezed between antagonistic and adversarial State and non-state actors in the country. Zehra (2019) writes about Pakistani men’s dichotomy and double standards in her article in *The Guardian*². She rues the double standards by stating that Pakistani men applaud women riding bicycles on the roads, provided the women are white. Many people believe that by marching on the streets, the women have shown "vulgar" behavior and have “strayed” from the traditions and culture of a Muslim country. Following a liberal and anti-Islamic agenda has "enervated" a just cause for women’s rights, page number (Bari, 2021).

To sum up, the organizers of this movement intend to persist in this fray until the State pays heed to their demands. So far, the participants believe that the *March* has been a promising success, and its momentum has elevated the number of participants with increasing awareness. However, the organizers are still elite or urban-educated women who have very little to do with the women of the working class, women from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, or rural areas. It causes a disconnect among women of these classes with the *Aurat March*, as they feel self-conscious and uneasy about discussing their problems with women they think they do not sufficiently understand.

² The article uses the tweet by Cynthia Ritchie an American influencer who posted her picture riding a bike in Peshawar citing freedom in Pakistan and decried the Pakistani feminists as mere propagandist.

5. Recommendations & Limitations

A few suggestions may be appropriate to overcome some of the shortcomings discussed above for future studies. A more significant effort must be made to reach subordinate social classes, especially in rural areas. People from different geographical regions and diverse religious communities must meet and exchange ideas. This will garner inclusivity, equality, recognition, and respect. There should be a liaison with law enforcement agencies and the penal justice system in case of attacks on March or individual women and men participating. A deep and continuous dialogue is needed with the media that distorted the speeches and reported them obscene. A few sympathetic voices need to be engaged to portray the march better. The deep-rooted fundamentalism and traditionalism which has resulted in misogyny and patriarchy will take decades to discount. Despite such challenges, the steadfast tenacity and perseverance of the organizers and participants of the *Aurat March* have lent obduracy to the movement and ensured that it is here to stay for the years to come.

6.1 Funding details:

Funding has yet to be received to accomplish this research.

7. Conclusion

The *Aurat March*, as an exciting feminist event, kicked off with protests against harassment in public domains and eventually gained impetus to form an entire movement. Gender issues such as harassment, physical and emotional violence at home, forced conversions and early marriages, minority rights, harassment by security forces, and patriarchy have come to the forefront. It has changed the feminist landscape in Pakistan by inaugurating a whole new phase in which private spheres have been challenged and the personal declared political for the first time in Pakistan.

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