Introduction

Feminist movements in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan are entering a new wave as young women are now reclaiming their space in both the public and the digital arenas. In Muslim countries with a strong religious outlook, the presence of women in public spaces is often restricted because of either social customs or statutory laws, as is the case in Saudi Arabia (Geel, 2016). In some other Muslim countries, like Iran, women are policed in public spaces to enforce mandatory Islamic dress codes (Tohidi, 2010). Yet, Pakistani women (as well as those in some other Muslim settings) are now venturing into domains that previously were strictly off limits. Historically, women’s rights movements in Pakistan have remained polarized on the question of either adopting secular Western notions of women’s rights, liberalization and empowerment or embracing an Islamic narrative of women’s rights (Saigol, 2016; Zia, 2018). Since the inception of Pakistan in 1947, women’s rights movements and activists have faced the challenge of social acceptance and relevance, since many people believe that Islam has already given all necessary rights to women (Kirmani, 2013; Saigol, 2016).

This chapter evaluates how women’s rights activists are reclaiming both physical and digital public spaces in Pakistan and how the public at large responds to them. It also explores how the penetration of digital technologies and platforms has affected the feminist movement and gendered spaces in Pakistan. Internet penetration in the country is at 32.4% and Facebook usage is at 15.6% of the total population, according to current estimates (Internet World Stats, 2019). Yet, the new wave of feminism in Pakistan is characterized by the use of digital technologies and platforms for the propagation of women’s rights. The feminist movement has attained public visibility because of its use of digital platforms, leading to heated public debate in wider society (Rehman, 2017).

In order to understand this new wave of feminism and public debate around it, we make use of the Aurat March (Women’s March) or also called Aurat Azadi March (Women’s Liberation March) and its presence on the digital platforms Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. These marches were held in 2018, 2019 and 2020 in different cities of Pakistan simultaneously, and they have gained remarkable attention in both traditional and digital media platforms. In the past, women’s rights organizations and activists have organized marches and protests, for instance during the martial law of General Zia-ul-Haq in the 1980s, against his Islamization
A women’s collective called *Hum Auratein* (We the Women) organized the *Aurat March* of 2018 in the three major cities of Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad. The next year, in 2019, the march expanded to other cities and even to the country’s small provinces of Gilgit-Baltistan and Balochistan, where Balochistan is regarded particularly as more conservative on issues such as gender equity and equality. Women in these small-sized provinces are not represented very well in the mainstream media and the political landscape, but the *Aurat March* put them in the spotlight. The *Aurat March* was supported by different women’s rights organizations and attended by men and women from various walks of life. Many of its slogans like *khana khud garam kr lo* (warm your food yourself) and *mera jism meri marzi* (my body, my choice), written on the placards of the participants, acquired iconic status in public discussions.

Using the discussion around these two women’s marches on social media, this chapter examines not only feminist narratives and issues in a Muslim state but also the public response towards them. Though Muslim countries are diverse in terms of the status of their women (Offenhauer, 2005), the status of women and their role in society depends on the place of Islam in that society (Fish, 2011). This discussion about the feminist movement and women’s rights in Pakistan is helpful in understanding the problems and challenges faced by women in Muslim societies around the world.

Before evaluating the new wave of feminism in Pakistan, this chapter begins with a theoretical discussion around three varied but interrelated topics of public spaces, gender and religion. The first section of the chapter contextualizes the concept of public spaces and the private realm in the light of the public sphere of Habermas (1962) and the public realm of Hannah Arendt (1958). We draw together our understanding of public spaces with respect to the disciplines of communication, political science, anthropology and urban studies. In the next part, we discuss inequitable access to public and digital spaces and the dissimilar experience of all genders in these spaces. This sheds light on the interconnectedness of religion and gendered spaces. In the final part, we outline the methods and results of our study about the *Aurat March* in Pakistan.

### The concept of public space

While the concept of public space is often conjoined with the notion of the public sphere, where public spaces are physical places that serve as the platform for public engagement, the public sphere is conceptualized as a metaphorical term describing the social space where the propagation of ideas and opinions in society take place (McKee, 2005). Public space is often used synonymously (Aubin, 2014) and sometimes even alternatively with “the public sphere” (Diamond, 2014). The modern-day approach to the public sphere was developed by Jürgen Habermas in his book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere—An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, originally published in 1962 in German. He defined the public sphere as an alternative space, away from the private realm and state control, where public debate could be held. Even before the onset of the concept of the public sphere by Habermas, Hannah Arendt had also illustrated the idea of public realm in her book *The Human Condition* published in 1958, with her articulation of the public realm representing an overlap of the public sphere and public space. Arendt (1958) explains that the public realm, in contrast to private places, “is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place” (p. 52). The public realm is more spatial in nature; where actors appear, they come in direct contact with each other and even compete with each other. The public sphere is more of a discursive space where different actors need not share spatial proximity even as they indulge in deliberation and form public opinion.

The notions of public space and public sphere have been a topic of debate in a variety of disciplines, including architecture, urban planning, sociology, communication studies and political science. In this chapter, we use a concept of public space that combines both the understandings...
Reclaiming public and digital spaces

of the public sphere of Habermas and the public realm of Arendt as we keep in consideration that the public sphere is contingent on the availability and maintenance of public spaces (Mur-ray, 2016). Public spaces are open spaces accessible to everyone. UNESCO (2019) gives an expansive and comprehensive definition of public spaces:

A public space refers to an area or place that is open and accessible to all peoples, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, age or socio-economic level. These are public gathering spaces such as plazas, squares and parks. Connecting spaces, such as sidewalks and streets, are also public spaces. In the 21st century, some even consider the virtual spaces available through the internet as a new type of public space that develops interaction and social mixing.

In UNESCO’s definition, digital and virtual spaces are also considered as public spaces where people from diverse backgrounds interact and form communities. Interestingly, the digital and virtual spaces of the present day characterize the qualities of both public realm and public sphere, as digital space is both discursive and spatial in nature. Our study focuses on the use of both physical and digital public spaces by the feminist movements; hence, the definition by UNESCO is relatable and workable for our study.

Inequitable access to public spaces

To be able to use public space is an implied human right. Fundamental human rights like the right to the freedom of movement, thought, religion, assembly, association and free participation in cultural activities depend on the provision of public spaces (Kanes et al., 2019). Yet many sections of society are denied access to public spaces, and the very concept of “publicness” seems to be illusory. Both Arendt and Habermas are also criticized by feminist scholars for neglecting the patriarchal structures of the public sphere and for losing sight of the emancipation of women in their division of private and public (Fraser, 1990). In reality the distinction between the public and private sphere is not sharp but fluid (Wright, 2012) and is not physical in nature, but rather is reinforced conceptually, imaginatively and culturally. Nonetheless, the division of public and private spaces reinforces the attribution of different gender roles, where women are assigned more domestic tasks of home management and child rearing in the private sphere, while men are considered workers and breadwinners in the public sphere (Smyth, 2008). These social roles have led to men and women inhabiting separate places and having a different experience of the same place because of differential treatment, representation and experience in those places (Sewell, 2003).

By contrast, a utopian view of digital spaces promised more support for the emergence of a democratic environment conducive to feminists causes (Carstensen, 2009; Scott et al., 2001). Hence, the Internet has been regarded as a public space because of its social, cultural and political functions, but it is not acknowledged widely as a constituent of the public sphere because the digital divide and the commercialization of virtual spaces has hampered its democratic potential (Papacharissi, 2002). Even Habermas (2006) expressed uncertainty regarding its capacity for fostering democratic culture and environment because of its over-commercialized nature. Digital spaces are also gendered in nature and have reinforced traditional gender roles (Reagle, 2013; Scott et al., 2001). They embody real-life social patterns and phenomena, thus maintaining a status quo and harboring racial-, gender- and class-based inequalities (Carstensen, 2009; Scott et al., 2001; Shapiro, 2010). Digital spaces are often monopolized by men (Herring, 1996; Kramarae & Taylor, 1993), and very often women face online harassment and threats of violence (Ferganchick-Neufang, 1998; Inayatullah & Milojevic, 1999). In this
chapter, we explore how Pakistani women in general and feminists in particular navigate both physical and digital public spaces and the kinds of responses they receive from society.

**Religion, gender and public spaces**

It is a widespread and long held belief amongst the majority in Pakistan that both genders are different from each other and are supposed to perform different roles, with the mass media perpetuating this stereotypical view (Wood, 2014). However, meta-analyses of the studies on psychological gender differences support the gender similarity hypothesis (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974) and prove that “males and females are alike on most—but not all—psychological variables” (Hyde, 2005, p. 581). People continue to hold on to the notions of gender differences, and religion is among many factors that signifies and reinforces different roles for men and women. Religions are blamed for justifying gender inequality (Glick et al., 2002), and literal meanings of religious scriptures are often used to endorse stereotypical gender roles and sexism (Burn & Busso, 2005; Daly, 1985; Gross, 1996).

Sexism is defined as gender-based prejudicial attitudes and beliefs, which may result in behaviors like discrimination and harassment (Hall et al., 2012). The targets of sexism can be of any gender, but women fall prey to sexist attitudes more often than men. Sexist attitudes are not always displayed in a hostile, violent or negative manner. Glick and Fiske (1996) characterized sexism as “ambivalent” and contradictory feelings of “hostility and benevolence” in combination. Hostile sexism views women as manipulative and mean creatures who seek to control men either through their feminist ideology or through sexuality. Benevolent sexism is reflected in protective paternalism according to which women are depicted as more caring and nurturing. They are fragile and hence need to be protected. Religions and the religiosity of individuals is found to be a significant source of both benevolent and hostile sexism (Christopher & Mull, 2006; Glick et al., 2002; Hannover et al., 2018; Hunsberger et al., 2009; McPherson, 2019; Taşdemir & Sakallı-Uğurlu, 2010).

The Islamic Republic of Pakistan is among the top five countries of the world where more than 90% of people consider religion very important in their life (Pew Research Center, 2018). This trend indicates high levels of religiosity in Pakistani society, which often leads to both benevolent and hostile sexism, particularly on the part of male members of society (Shahzad et al., 2015). Hostile and benevolent sexism both result in gender inequalities and restrict the role of women in the public sphere (Cikara et al., 2009). Benevolent sexism particularly legitimizes the exclusion of women from the public sphere on a pretext of their protection. Pakistan ranks 151 among 153 total countries on the Global Gender Gap Index (World Economic Forum, 2020), and the employment-to-population ratio among women in Pakistan is only 22% compared to 64% for male workers (World Bank, 2019).

As discussed in the previous section, gender roles in the physical social world are extended into digital spaces. Mirroring the ways that some religions and cultures confine women to private spaces, in the same way women might restrict themselves in online spaces to women-only groups and communities. However, women typically engage in an exclusively female experience in order to avoid toxic masculinities dominating virtual space, alongside avoiding online harassment and threats. These women-only groups belong to diverse fields, issues and topics such as health, business, family and lifestyle. Women also create and join such groups in online spaces for religious purposes and discuss religious issues to avoid men’s authority and interference (Piela, 2013; Tomalin et al., 2015). Even women’s rights activists form women-only groups in order to acquire safe spaces for themselves (Clark-Parson, 2018).

The case of the *Aurat March* in Pakistan is the ideal example to investigate the interconnectedness of gender and religion in public and digital spaces. We will discuss how the
feminist movement challenges the gendered roles perpetuated by the divide of private and public in a religious and conservative society like Pakistan and address the following questions:

a What narratives (religious or secular) dominate the contemporary feminist movement in Pakistan?
b What issues are activists of this new digital wave of feminism raising?
c How is the public, particularly everyday women in Pakistan, responding to this new digital phase of the women’s rights movement?

Method

The *Aurat Azadi March* or Women’s Liberation March was held on 8 March of three consecutive years in 2018, 2019 and 2020, although our research was carried out before 2020. We used the words *Aurat March* or *Aurat Azadi March* as our search terms on the three social media platforms—Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The simple search without any time limit generated thousands of public posts, so we restricted our search results to two days, 8 March (the day the march was held) and 9 March (the day after the march) for both 2018 and 2019. The search resulted in a total of 312 public posts from these three social media platforms, among which 42 posts were from Facebook, 53 from Twitter and 217 from Instagram. There were a total of 14,420 comments on these posts ranging from zero to 1,643 on a single post ($M = 46.22$, $SD = 138.9$). Qualitative analysis of these posts and their comments was employed to understand the narrative of women’s rights activists and the public response. Along with qualitative thematic analysis, all posts were also coded quantitatively for their form, the nature of the poster, the tone expressed for the Women’s March in the post, and the overall tone of public comments on the post toward the Women’s March or women’s rights. This quantitative coding helped build a general understanding of the public posts shared about the *Aurat March*.

**Form of the Post:** Posts were classified into text, photo, video, a combination of either text and video or text and photo, or a mix of all three forms.

**Nature of the Poster:** Contributors of the posts were coded for their gender as male, female and other. If a single individual did not share the post, it was coded as a page. Page could be either of general type or of media organization.

**Tone of the Post:** We coded each post on a five-point scale for the tone expressed towards the Women’s March. The tone in the post could be positive, negative or neutral for the march. It also could be either abusive or supportive, showing solidarity or emotional support for the march.

**Tone of Public Comments:** The coding of public comments helped us understand the general response toward the *Aurat March* and women’s rights. Any tone that dominated the comment section was considered the overall tone of the public comments. Each post was coded for having dominantly abusive, negative, positive, neutral/mix of positive and negative, or supportive, that is, showing solidarity and support in the comments.

**Thematic Analysis:** All 312 selected posts of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and their public comments were also analyzed qualitatively. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method that is not rooted in any theoretical underpinnings but helps in “identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 6). We used the semantic and the latent levels for the identification of themes to explore the present-day narratives in the women’s rights movement in Pakistan through the messages written on the placards. At a semantic level, we identified explicit ideas presented on the placards. For this, we read and reread every post and the comments on it, and coded all of them for the topics and issues. For instance, in the comments we identified the negative response and even hatred of many women toward the march. Once this coding at a semantic level was done, then we looked into the similarities of these
codes and put similar codes under one thematic umbrella. Theme identification was done at a latent level, for example the negativity that some women expressed for the march was identified as a disconnect between the *Aurat March* and those women.

We considered a theme present in the data if it occurred in most of the posts and comments even if it appeared only marginally in them. The posts were analyzed by both researchers separately in order to ensure the consistency of the themes.

### Results and analysis

Quantitative coding showed that the highest number of posts were a combination of text and photos (83.3%). Out of 312 posts, 146 (46.8%) had a positive tone for the *Aurat March* and 84 (26.9%) showed solidarity and emotional support to its cause. The higher number of favorable posts for the march was anticipated, as most of these selected public posts were shared by the female contributors (48.7%) and the pages of different organizations (34.9%) that worked for women’s rights. The official page of the *Aurat March* and its allied page *Girls at Dhabas* (girls at roadside cafes) shared most of the posts.

Out of the 312 posts, 108 (34.6%) had dominantly positive comments toward the *Aurat March* and women’s rights issues, and only 11 posts (3.5%) had supportive comments. Sixty-five posts (20.84%) received either neutral or almost an equal number of positive and negative comments, 50 posts (16%) had dominantly negative and 47 (15.1%) had abusive comments. This indicates that there were a considerable number of posts where the public were mainly abusive and negative, but overall positive and neutral comments prevailed on the posts, thus showing a positive public response toward the march.

The tone of the post did affect the tone of the public comments underneath. Positive posts got more positive comments for the *Aurat March* while negative posts had higher numbers of negative comments (see Figure 7.1). However, the nature and the gender of the poster did not

![Figure 7.1](image-url)  
*Figure 7.1* Tone of the posts and overall tone of public comments
affect the tone of public comments, and only the tone of the posts was the main trigger of the nature of public comments.

In the next two sections, the results of the qualitative analysis are presented. The first section presents the details of the narratives and issues that present-day feminists in Pakistan are endorsing in their movement. The second section details the public response toward the *Aurat March* and women’s rights issues.

**Narratives of the women’s rights movement**

Women’s rights movements in Pakistan are mainly focused on macro-level issues. As Saigol (2016) points out, “The Pakistani women’s movements have remained preoccupied with the state, law, customary practices, citizenship, identity, ideology and the economy” (p. 41). The *Aurat March* organized in the years 2018 and 2019 clearly addressed this problem, and placards in these marches not only raised voices for the economic and political rights and civil liberties of women, but also loudly challenged patriarchal practices in society that are enshrined in the family system and the privacy of the home. Analysis of the social media posts mainly sharing the photos of placards held by the participants of the Women’s March yielded four main themes: the continuing legacy of struggle, inclusivity and diversity, reclaiming public spaces and the emergence of what has been called “gender resistant radical feminism” (Lorber, 1997).

**The continuing legacy of struggle**

The women’s rights movement in Pakistan has come a long way since the inception of Pakistan and the development of the first women’s rights platform—the All Pakistan Women’s Association (APWA)—that was founded in 1949 by First Lady Begum Ra’ana Liaquat Ali Khan. The women’s rights movement particularly gained momentum in the 1980s during the regime of military dictator General Zia-ul-Haq. In a bid to Islamize the state, he promulgated ordinances that targeted the civil liberties of women, restricted them to *chadar aur char diwari* (meaning, the veil and four walls of a home), and installed barbaric punishments. Women fought hard for their rights during that period. Many of those draconian laws were repealed and amended, and some new protective ordinances had been introduced like The Protection of Women Act and The Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2010.

Despite the achievement of legal amendments and new ordinances, examination of the issues on placards and debates in the social media posts indicated that similar struggles remained relevant. One woman shared the reason for her participation in the march,

> We marched for basic health care, implementation of The Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2010.

A young girl at the *Aurat March* held a placard stating, “neither I am half nor incomplete, I am an equal and unique entity” [translated]. This slogan hinted at the Law of Evidence imposed in 1984 during the military dictator regime. This law reduced the testimony of two women equal to one man in financial legal issues. Some other slogans read like “Don’t be afraid, I want equality not superiority”, “equal pay, equal work”, “men of quality do not fear equality”, and “nobody wants a daughter but everyone wants a woman in the bed” [translated]. The sociocultural attitudes of dislike and disdain following the birth of a baby girl are another example of gender inequality. Pakistani women have been and still are contesting for equality in many
spheres. Years’ long struggle has not garnered significant success in changing the social fabric of society and repealing the laws violating women’s equal status.

Inclusivity and diversity

From the manifesto presented to the attendees and the slogans raised, the Aurat March was inclusive and diverse. Rubina Saigol (2016) previously commented on the lack of inclusivity of women’s right movements in Pakistan as they “have refrained from touching the issues of sexuality especially Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) even though there is increasing awareness of such issues globally” (p. 41). Contemporary women activists at the Aurat March stepped outside of the binary spectrum of gender identities. While trans women shared the platform publicly, given that homosexuality is considered taboo and is punishable as a crime in Pakistan, lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals were not particularly visible in the march. Nonetheless, the manifesto of the Aurat March was endearingly broad, stating, “Our feminism is queer, trans-inclusive, class conscious and seeks to embrace all various disabilities”. This manifesto indicates the broadly liberal and secular principles adopted by the feminist movement in Pakistan.

The embodiment of binary and non-binary sexualities and gender identities was not the only way in which the march was inclusive, but it also drew women belonging to different classes, ascribing to dissimilar political and ideological positions and displaying varied attire. From sleeveless dresses to completely veiled in a black cloak (Abaya), photos of the march circulated on social media exhibited an expansive idea of sisterhood. Women’s rights activists are often labeled as westernized and elitist, but present-day activists in Pakistan appear to embrace people radically different from them as well. From housewives to working women, from home-based workers to entrepreneurs, and from health workers to students of elite institutions, all protested for their rights.

One of the banners proudly flaunted Aaj waqai maa behn ek ho rahi hai (today mothers and sisters are coming together). This slogan was witty and sarcastic as this expression is a form of verbal abuse in the Urdu language that is used very often in quarrels by men. The implied meaning of this abuse is to “fuck one’s sister and mother both”. The banner used this sexist slur to comment on the diversity and unity of the march but also to show scorn for sexist abuse.

Reclaiming public spaces

The Pakistani women’s movement has a history of protesting and taking to the street. In the first phase of the women’s movement during the martial law of military dictator General Zia-ul-Haq, women staged public protests for legal reforms and even became victims of state brutality. After the dictatorship was over, the women’s movement went into a less active and “a more diffused” second phase, and “social movement activism shifted from the streets to the courts and other state institutions” (Shaheed, 2010, p. 105). We argue that a new phase of the women’s rights movement has emerged with the Aurat March in 2018 and 2019. This movement is different from the second phase and similar to the first for bringing activism out onto the streets. However, it shows dissimilarities to the first phase, too, as the new phase activists have come out on the streets not only to protest but also to reclaim public spaces. One woman shared in her post,

As women we are often made to feel that the public space is not our domain; that if we are to enter it then there are rules to be followed of what an acceptable dress code
is, what an acceptable pace of walking is, what an acceptable reason for being outside is. This #womensday I will be marching because these streets are as much mine as they are anyone else's.

Girls at Dhabas (Girls at roadside cafes) was one of the co-organizers of the march, and its central theme is to strive for a world with equal access to public spaces for all genders. As a result of this, the deliberate attempt to salvage public spaces from male domination was visible in the slogans like “our roads, our right” and “freedom over fear”. The Thomson Reuters Foundation conducted an expert poll in 2011 that ranked Pakistan as the third most dangerous country for women. Seven years later, in 2018, they repeated the poll and Pakistan still ranked at number six among the top ten the most dangerous countries of the world (Thomson Reuters Foundation, 2018). Fear is one reason that many women do not go out into public places without male accompaniment. Patriarchal social structure also restricts women's agency in public spaces.

Women's rights activists challenged these patriarchal structures and practices. They attended the march on motorbikes or bicycles, a rare incident in Pakistan. The most revolutionary of all was a “funeral procession of patriarchy”, as participants of the march carried a coffin labeled as patriarchy. Women in Pakistan are hardly ever seen publicly carrying a funeral casket as it is considered to be a man's job, and religious clergy frown upon women's participation in funeral ceremonies. The public response to staging the funeral of patriarchy was a mix of negativity and sarcasm, but this act itself was a sign of resistance and a proclamation of agency in public spaces on the part of present-day activists.

The emergence of gender-resistant radical feminism

When the women’s rights movement started in Pakistan, activists deliberately avoided using the term feminism or feminist movement for their endeavors, as many found feminism to be “too radical” (Saigol, 2016). Women’s rights activists in Pakistan were attached to different schools of thought intentionally or unintentionally, but overall the movement did not demonstrate any single political or intellectual underpinning. Multiple strands of feminist approaches were dominant simultaneously. Activists who participated in the Aurat March have embraced feminism, and at present, gender-resistant radicalism seems to be an emerging trend.

According to Lorber (1997, p. 16), “Radical feminism had its start in small, leaderless, women-only consciousness-raising groups, where the topics of intense discussion came out of women's daily lives—housework, serving men’s emotional and sexual needs, menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, menopause.” Radical feminists in Pakistan also vow to fight patriarchy in both private and public spheres and address all the issues of women’s daily lives. Slogans of the march confronted patriarchy and put the focus not only on the issues of the public sphere but on the private spaces as well.

The most iconic slogans of the march, including khana khud garam krlo (warm your food yourself), mera jism meri marzi (my body, my choice), and mujhe kya maloom tumhara mouza kahan hai (how should I know where your socks are?), highlighted the issues related to home and family system. These slogans wittily called for a change in gendered division of labor on the home front. They also challenged male privilege, in which men consider it their right to make women the target of unsolicited sexual advances. This challenge translated into the slogan apni dick pics apnay pas rakho (keep your dick photos to yourself) and caused an extreme uproar. They also raised their voice on menstruation and affordable personal hygiene products in the march. These issues were considered private hence excluded from public debate, but for the first time the Aurat March brought them to the public discourse. According to Lorber (1997),
“the main idea among all the gender resistant feminisms is that women and women’s perspectives should be central to knowledge, culture, and politics, not invisible or marginal” (p. 21). Pakistani feminists have taken just the first step to achieve this centrality through the Women’s March. Every slogan on the placards had its own story, which exposed the double standards of society for women.

The public response toward the Aurat March

While our quantitative analysis indicated the prevalence of positive feedback on the posts that were favorable toward the march, this could be due to moderation and deletion of abusive comments by the pages of some organizations. For instance, the official page of the Aurat March on Facebook clearly mentions the policy of removing hateful, profane, offensive and violent comments, and we found all the posts on the Facebook page had a positive aggregate tone with respect to the public comments. This problem makes the qualitative analysis of comments more relevant, yet it remains challenging.

Despite this moderation of a few pages, there were public posts that did not delete abusive comments. Every post on social media platforms that carried the witty yet poignant slogans became the target of vitriol. Even if the placard in the photo demanded in plain words basic rights such as education, health and an end to gender-based discrimination and sexual and domestic violence, the response was still scornful. Words like “vulgar”, “obscene”, “inappropriate” and “indecent” summarize the overall public response on the Aurat March. A few apparently extreme conservatives on social media even accused participants of hatching Illuminati and Zionist conspiracies to destroy the moral fabric of the Pakistani society. They also called the activists “Western liberals” and “American agents” working against the interests of the country. Calling someone a Western liberal or an American agent is an expression of hate from the “fundamentalist” section of Pakistani society. They use these labels for progressive and liberal entities in a bid to question their patriotism and mark them as un-Islamic. Using religion and nationalism as a tool to exclude and silence any voice of dissent has a long history in Pakistan (Fuchs, 2020; Saeed, 2010), and feminists have fallen prey to this exclusion very often (Malik, 2002).

Qualitative analysis of the social media posts and their comments indicated that public response on the march was a combination of skepticism and outrage. Religion as a yardstick for critiquing the present-day narratives of feminists was the core theme that emerged in the public response. Thus, centrality of Islam, the disconnect between the Aurat March and every-day women and an epidemic of incivility emerged as three main themes in the public response toward the Aurat March.

Centrality of Islam

According to the Pew Research Center (2018), 94% of Pakistanis declared religion as very or somewhat important in their life, indicating a very high level of religiosity. On most of the posts, there were at least one or two comments giving reference to Islam and its teaching regarding the status of women in society and their rights. Some comments on posts jokingly uttered “perform your own funeral ceremony” because only men in the graveyards of most of the Muslim countries can attend funeral ceremonies. In this way, the religious practice of the funeral ceremony was used to mock the slogan “warm your own food”. Some other comments urged women to “say no to Feminism, say no to Secularism. We are proud Muslims and know our values”. People justified their criticism of the Aurat March using religious injunctions. Women were reminded of the true role models of Islam and were compelled to follow them.
Many comments suggested that Islam had given rights to women and there was no need for feminism in Pakistani society. Many posts carried comments in which women’s rights were explained using Quranic verses and injunctions. Often, feminists on digital platforms responded back with logic,

A woman demanding for her right is too fast, too modern and un-Islamic. Islam is a balanced religion. If it asks women to cover, it also asks men to lower their gaze but sadly we teach women to cover but never teach the boys to lower their gaze. That’s what feminism demands. Give us equal rights!

Despite this logical argument, the *Aurat March* was considered an assault on Muslimness,

This is a direct attack on Pakistani Muslim women by liberal mindset. Oh Muslim girls, stand up to fight these morons they are a curse to our family system.

Feminism was not regarded as an acceptable approach for a Muslim society. Women’s rights activists were told that demands for gender equality and equal rights can be made, but within certain limits. Women were repeatedly told that they were not equal to men as God made them differently. According to some, feminism was nothing but an excuse to sideline Islamic teachings and culture. Some people even warned women of divine punishment for not adhering to the Islamic notion of womanhood.

In the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, religion is undoubtedly a central aspect of societal fabric. However, women’s rights movements have tended to shy away from addressing the role of religion and have remained ambivalent about Islam (Saigol, 2016). Though the women’s rights movements in Pakistan have mainly remained secular in their outlook, they have nonetheless sometimes employed the engagement of religious actors to achieve some of their goals (Kirmani, 2013; Saigol, 2016; Zia, 2009). With the advent of this new phase of feminism after the *Aurat March*, some liberals are increasingly emphasizing the need to address the issue of religion in feminist discourse in Pakistan. For instance, in one of our selected posts, the Facebook status of a man who seemed to have a liberal orientation advised the same to present-day feminists. He gave not only the option of critique toward religion but even suggested engagement with religion and religious actors in order to gain relevance and acceptance in society.

**The disconnect between the *Aurat March* and everyday women**

While the gender gap is very real in Pakistan, social media posts and their comments revealed that many Pakistani women are completely oblivious of this fact. They undertook the line of argument adopted by men that the “real issues” were not highlighted in the march. One woman wrote,

I never knew this was a Pakistani women’s problem. Instead of making women strong, they degraded women just to prove they are above males.

These women were not from poor or lower-middle-class backgrounds who have no access to education and awareness, and hence to a broader worldview. These women were educated enough as they have presence on social media, but they did not approve of feminism and the *Aurat March*. Another retorted, “these women are giving us a bad name, because of them our families don’t let us go out as they fear we will also go astray” [translated]. Some of them
proclaimed liberal, strong and independent identities but they rejected feminism as their brand. They vowed to fight for their rights but condemned the banners and slogans written on them. One of them even decided to become anti-feminist,

I consider myself as a modern independent girl but looking at these posters I swear I feel ashamed. I don’t know who are these women. You can’t have respect by disrespecting the opposite gender. Women rights doesn’t mean no boundaries at all. What the hell are they trying to teach through this? If this is what you call feminism then I’m anti feminist from now.

Another woman offered her more nuanced understanding of feminism, and according to her,

Feminism is not about protecting women. It’s an anti-man wicked ideology that seeks to destroy society, culture and families. Feminism is discriminatory against man. It’s all about slut walk, abortion, choice, bashing man, toplessness. They consider man as a reference point and chase it.

This disconnect seemed to be resulting from deeply ingrained patriarchy and a misunderstood concept of feminism. Women consider feminism as an alien Western concept, hence they reject it (Ahmad, 2015; Tonnessen, 2014). Even often-repeated statements from feminists, like “do not confuse feminism with misandry”, could not resolve this issue. Additionally, asking for rights from the intangible entity of the state on a virtual platform may come easily to some women. Negotiating the same demands with their own husband, father and brother in real life is a herculean task, as men are considered not only the breadwinner but the head of the family as well (Akhter & Akbar, 2016; Siraj, 2010). Pakistani women will also need some time to grapple with radical feminism and internalize the idea to question patriarchy in their own homes.

**Epidemic of incivility**

Despite having Islam as a central theme in the public response toward the *Aurat March*, incivility across all social media platforms was disturbingly dominant. Religion and civility are normally considered to go hand in glove as religious actors assert to hold high moral standards (Pew Research Center, 2013; Tamir et al., 2020; Zuckerman, 2008). Participants of the march were denounced on charges of indecency and inappropriateness. Yet, in response to this indecency, an epidemic of incivility was unleashed against women. From body shaming to slut shaming and from mockery to serious threats of violence, the public response in the comment section of selected posts was full of sexist slurs and sexual innuendo. Men indulged in more sexualized and violent responses, whereas the incivility of the women who opposed the march remained limited to cursing on social media.

Women were mocked for their physical features and they were accused of wearing provocative clothes. A person set the standard about revealing dress in his comment, “Open hair, tight shirt plus jeans ohh you want to walk home safe? No no no”. Another comment condemned the march in profane language, “SORRY TO SAY, that is not *Aurat March* but a slut seminar to showcase how filthy & cheap they are”. They were told that they do not need freedom and independence but a harsh beating to fix their innate problems. One of the activists was holding a placard condemning acid attacks on women and she was brutally told off that “she needs more acid to drink”. These were only a few of the examples of violent threats women received.
Reclaiming public and digital spaces

on social media, and we could analyze them because of their public status. Many women who were active in the march and on social media complained of rape and death threats in private messages (“Aurat March”, 2019). These threats clearly indicate that digital spaces are also not safe for women, and they have to navigate these spaces differently from men. It is also indicative of the fact that the public sphere and public realms lack the publicness that is welcoming for all.

Conclusion

The results of our thematic analysis indicate strong resistance from the religious sections of society toward the secular Pakistani women’s movement, and the Aurat March. Through participation in the march, women have come together to reclaim public spaces and to raise, loudly and clearly, the issues that are considered private or taboo (Saigol & Chaudhary, 2020). In public spaces, women showed unity and sisterhood and acted as a collective of like-minded people. Public space became safer for them in the march even though they expressed radical ideas. Digital spaces became more antagonizing for activists, as their radical ideas were contested and exposed the participants to unnecessary threat. This showed the continuing conundrum of acceptance and relevance for feminism in Pakistan. The reason for this non-relevance was mainly their secular outlook, the same as their predecessors had, though their discourse is broad as it touched the taboos and far-reaching because it generated a public debate. They challenge and vow to fight patriarchy at the state, public and private levels. Feminists of this new wave have raised every possible issue affecting women in their march and in social media as well. Though only a few of their slogans garnered widespread attention, closer examination has revealed myriad topics.

Public response to the Aurat March, particularly the disproportionate outrage of men, showed exactly why women marched for their rights. Women were humiliated and mocked in the digital sphere because they reclaimed public spaces and insisted on becoming a part of the male-dominated public sphere. They were trolled for neglecting the real issue of Pakistani women but faced more hatred when they made those real issues part of public discourse. Many women also expressed their disapproval of the Aurat March and alienated themselves from the slogans. Even though they condemned their contemporary activists, some of these women proclaimed a strong and independent identity for themselves on digital platforms. This brings a hope to Pakistani feminists that the conundrum of acceptance and relevance of feminist’s movement in Pakistan may soon be resolved.

References


Reclaiming public and digital spaces


