Evaluating Feminism's Lack of Mass Appeal in Pakistan:

A Case Study of the **Aurat March**

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Abstract

The Aurat March reflects a paradigm shift in the landscape of feminist politics in Pakistan. Although "Aurat" —the Urdu word for woman— has strong bearings, in this context, of an effort to vernacularize the march many persistently characterize it as a foreign construct. Efforts to dispel this image are generally reactionary; they range from campaigns that increasingly employ local language, imagery, and symbolism to mobilization and outreach programs in far-flung areas in a bid to garner support from the lower strata. This paper employs a mixed-methods approach to explore the question of why the Aurat March falls short of mass appeal in Pakistan. To this end, it draws on interviews, surveys and focus group discussions to investigate the discrepancies between local feminist politics and the multiple contextual complexities that frame the lives of Pakistani women. Additionally, this paper situates what is currently known as the "post-secular turn" in feminism and the work of feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti in the broader Pakistani feminist praxis to highlight the ethical dimension of developing an appreciation of the specificities and complexities of women in different contexts. In place of the impoverished way debates on gender politics and agency are bandied about in the Pakistani context, this paper highlights the consequences of sweeping generalizations that frame conscious agents with independent agendas as an undifferentiated oppressed mass.

Research Context

In this section I outline the various camps vis-a-vis the Aurat March before I move on to analyze the lack of public support for feminist activism in Pakistan. Specifically, I employ the Aurat March as a focal point of inquiry in this paper to propose recommendations that apply in the broader context of feminist activism in Pakistan. The objective of this exercise is to address the existent shortfalls and devise a framework of value to the female cause, whereby mass appeal is not an end product but a natural by-product.

Pakistan's fourth wave of feminism marks a significant departure from its precursors that challenged the public, socio-legal sphere — the current iteration of feminism focuses on the "hallowed private sphere of the family, community, and society." (Saigol and Chaudhry, 2020) The 'Aurat March' title is a hypernym used to refer to a series of demonstrations organized in all major cities of Pakistan on International Women's Day. The march garners extensive media attention and outclasses other movements of a similar scale in the press coverage department. Amidst the backlash, many have fervently described it as a "revolutionary feat for Pakistan" (Shah, 2020), a demonstration of "sisterhood" (Khan, 2018), a "groundbreaking rally" (Saleem, 2020) and even a "march for life." (Malik, 2020)

Others in likeminded quarters, particularly feminists from an older generation, have supported and rallied for the Aurat March but critiqued the methods of the new wave feminists; their ambiguity over the role of religion and their disengagement with the state, considering the latter to be a "manifestation of individualism which characterizes the neo-liberal ethos." (Saigol and Chaudhry, 2020) They have critiqued the march's "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." (Zia, 2022) Saigol and Chaudhry (2020) highlighted

some of the internal "contradictions, tensions and divides" within the Aurat March including relationship with political parties, NGOs and intergenerational differences. Most of the activists and organizers they interviewed asserted that there are differences between and among various organizations of the Aurat March which include, inter alia, WAF, WDF, Hum Aurtain, Bolo Bhi and Feminist Collective.

Attempts were made to critically assess the discourse, placards and slogans of the Aurat March. (Alam, 2021; Riaz, Nasir and Mirza, 2021; Kamal, 2021; Mukhtar and Rana; 2022, Baig et al., 2020) Mukhtar and Rana (2022) and Kamal (2021) depict the use of placards as a tool of agency for women while Khushbakht and Sultana (2020) and Baig et al., (2020) question the representativeness of the placards; and assert that "all communities of different religions" usually do not support the march on account of cultural reservations. (Baig et al., 2020) In their article, "Conceptualizing Women's Agency, Autonomy and Empowerment", Mishra and Tripathi conceptualize agency as a necessary constituent of women empowerment; no improvement in outcomes can be considered women's empowerment if it is not coupled with the existence of women's agency. (Mishra and Tripathi, 2011) In other words, women must be involved as significant agents and actors in the process of change rather than mere recipients of the change. (G Sen 1993; Mehra 1997) The clean-stove program in rural India serves as a pertinent reminder of the indispensability of agency in women empowerment initiatives. During the 1990s in rural India, the eradication of wood-burning stoves became a focal agenda of feminists, activists and reformers in a bid to empower women, improve air quality and end the depletion of forests. Rafia Zakaria astutely points out,

"No one asked the women who did the cooking whether they wanted the new stoves, or considered the reasons why, it turned out, they did not want them: for one, that collecting fuel wood had been for centuries a ritual way in which rural women established and maintained their social bonds. It was in these exchanges that they discussed how to solve problems in their lives, how to overcome the many hardships faced by their communities and share their joys and losses, news of relatives and friends. It was an essential part of women-only socialization in these areas. Also, many/most of these rural Indian women rejected the idea that the route to empowerment was making themselves available for wage-earning work rather than for the literal tending of their own hearths—the cooking and caring for the household from that central point that they saw as an exercise of power." (Zakaria; 2021 p. 5)

She adds that collecting fuel wood did not include the cutting down of whole trees or carry such environmental implications as it was alleged to have. Importantly, in the eyes of rural Indian women, they were already "working" and their work was indispensable even if it was not adding to the wage economy. Zakaria explains that the promised "empowerment" was not in working menial, physically punishing jobs such as breaking rocks at construction sites and toiling in the fields in exchange for a bit more cash, but in economic, and therefore decision-making, power presumably gained by their dominion over the hearths of their homes, which they deeply cherished. The underlying assumption that human value and "empowerment" necessitate participation in the cash economy coincided with the rise of neoliberalism. To quote Zakaria, "In actual terms it converted, as political theorist Wendy Brown puts it, "homo politicus into homo economicus."

The clean-stove program of rural India illustrates the chasm between the women who write feminism and the women who live it, the ones who conceptualize it and the ones who experience it. As with any feminist initiative, it is pertinent to assess the representativeness of the Aurat March and analyze whether it serves as a tool for local women to realize their agency. Implicit in this is the need to first define agency.

Historian Gabrielle Spiegel provides a constructive overview of the epistemological turns in the different concepts of agency; starting with the 'linguistic turn', the radical structuralist paradigm conceptualized the subject as an "effect of discourse", in stark contrast to humanist discourse, which viewed the subject as "individual, centered, unitary." (Spiegel, 2005, p.11) Ultimately, as both definitions proved unsatisfactory, a new 'neo phenomenological approach' emerged during the 'historical turn' whereby the subject was conceptualized as both produced by the social world and actively shaped by the individual through the interpretation thereof. (Spiegel, 2005, p.17) It is along the lines of this 'neo-phenomenological approach' that the work of anthropologists Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood can be located. Asad explains that the various conceptions of agency have unique implications but culture theory tends to reduce them to the idea of a conscious agent-subject having the intent and the capacity to "move in a singular historical direction: that of increasing self-empowerment and decreasing pain" (Asad; 2003, pp 78-79) This "single historical direction" refers to —as Bresser (2013) interprets— "the implicit humanist, secular, liberal, progressive, Western mod ernist narrative that underpins the definition of agency as an (un)conscious movement towards personal empowerment and human flourishing." The presumed neutrality and universal applicability of this particular discursive tradition then risks discursive violence as well as analytical non-specificity. (Bresser, 2013) In other words, agency in this conceptualization is based on a specific set of notions surrounding subjection formation that presumes all humans strive for the same goals.

In her hugely influential work, Politics of Piety, Mahmood (2011) analyzes her own ethnographic fieldwork in the Egyptian urban women's piety movement as a secular feminist to explore the questions raised by Asad's inquiries. She underscores the inability within dominant feminist discourse to envision, "valuable forms of human flourishing outside the bounds of a

liberal, progressive imaginary"; specifically, she emphasizes the importance of understanding such movements on their own epistemological terms. (Mahmood; 2011 p.155) In the secular-liberal imaginary, the agency of these women would remain invisible; they may be perceived as victims of false consciousness who are pious not because of a conscious will but because of an unconscious internalization of religious values. Mahmood dismantles this notion and explains the ways in which these women are regularly challenged for their views. The ultimate goal of these women, however, was not to maximize individual power, freedom or authority but to be mindful of God. This involved the practice of living through some forms of deliberate personal endurance or disempowerment. Contrary to the assumption that power and discourse are external to the subject and the agent as an 'active subject' has the desire to oppose power so that disempowerment and suffering can be overcome, the underlying notion here is that power and discourse are actually inherent to the subject's formation. Hence, agency can be conceptualized in deliberate forms of disempowerment that do not always lead to maximizing individual empowerment or authority. (Bresser, 2013) It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve further into Mahmood's position and situate the philosophical underpinnings of her work in Foucault and Butler's poststructuralist emphasis. Nonetheless, her work illustrates that different discursive traditions give shape to different kinds of agency that need to be analyzed within their specific context. This requires the researcher to be accountable and transparent in his/her use of agency as an analytical tool.

Theoretical inquiries such as Mahmood's work are considered to constitute the 'post-secular turn' in the aftermath of radical post-structuralist relativism. The contemporary public debate on feminism has tilted away somewhat from its previous focus on politics, whereas "discourses about ethics, religious norms and values triumph." (Braidotti, 2008) The post-secular paradigm does not assume that the secular position or doctrine

(secularism) is either neutral or universally desirable; in this view, agency or political subjectivity can be conveyed through and supported by multiple discursive traditions. Major writers in the feminist tradition acknowledge the significance of the spiritual dimension in feminism (Alice Walker, 1983; Audre Lorde, 1984; Adrienne Rich, 1987) and a growing body of Pakistani feminist literature can be seen as symptomatic of the post-secular moment. (Amina Jamal, 2013; Humeira Iqtidar, 2011; Masooda Bano, 2010).

Mahmood's work does not develop a theory of agency. Rather, it encourages the reader to think about agency in a multiplicitious way and pay keen attention to the unique ambitions and ideals of women in different contexts. In her famous article Situated Knowledges, Donna Haraway critiques disembodied scientific objectivity from a feminist perspective and makes a profound case for epistemology rooted in 'situated knowledges':

"Situated knowledges require that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent, not as a screen or a ground or a resource, never finally as slave to the master that closes off the dialectic in his unique agency and his authorship of "objective" knowledge. The point is paradigmatically clear in critical approaches to the social and human sciences, where the agency of people studied itself transforms the entire project of producing social theory."

Although this critique alludes to knowledge production, it is intertwined with praxis. Knowledge informs practical strategies, goals and methods. What theories, paradigms and discursive traditions a movement — consciously or unconsciously — subscribes to significantly determine its praxis and reputation. For a movement to garner mass appeal, it is imperative to connect. To resonate, it must listen. It is reasonable to claim that the Aurat March is an indigenous, organic initiative. Arguably, however, it is difficult to claim the same of its methods, analytical tools, discourses, and strategies. Various chapters draw heavily on strands of socialist,

radical, intersectional and neo-liberal feminism to different degrees; each paradigm has its own analytical toolbox locatable in a specific epistemic basis. More often than not these tools are — in all their ethnocentric universality— incapable of capturing specific contexts. The aforementioned discourse on agency and the clean-stove program demonstrate how this phenomenon manifests in practice.

The Aurat March challenges the private sphere and dissolves the public/private divide — this could be a constructive exercise in and of itself. However, the generalized analytical tools/jargon and hence, the solutions, do not always resonate in the local context. Chandra Mohanty points out,

"Concepts like reproduction, the sexual division of labour, the family, marriage, household, patriarchy, etc., are often used without their specification in local cultural and historical contexts (...) Superficially similar situations may have radically different, historically specific explanations, and cannot be treated as identical. The rise of female-headed households in middle-class America might be construed as indicating women's independence and progress etc. However, the recent increase in female-headed households in Latin America, where women might be seen to have more decision-making power, is concentrated among the poorest strata (...) Thus, while it is possible to state that there is a rise in female-headed households in the US and in Latin America, this rise cannot be discussed as a universal indicator of women's independence, nor can it be discussed as a universal indicator of women's impoverishment." (Mohanty, 1988)

Identity is not limited to gender; it is constituted through a multifaceted interaction between gender, class, culture, religion, and other ideological institutions and frameworks. Local feminist politics generally conceptualizes women as a homogenous category of analysis on the basis of a shared subjugation; this category is continually labeled "oppressed, "powerless", "sexually exploited" etc., (much like sexist discourse stereotyping women

as 'weak', 'dramatic' and 'irrational') and overlooks other facets of their identity. Drawing on Kimberlé Crenshaw's landmark intersectionality theory where she argued for both race and gender to be considered in legal cases involving black women, Rafia Zakaria strikes an interesting parallel:

"Crenshaw's logic, if applied to Millett's trip to Iran, might have suggested that Iranian feminists' religio-cultural identity was just as important in understanding their situation as their gender, and that their political positions were more complex than a visiting white woman might immediately grasp." (Zakaria, 2020 p. 5)

While this is a reference to Kate Millet's visit to Iran as a white woman, a similar parallel can be drawn in local contexts when feminist politics overlooks other facets of women's identity. My point is simple: erasure of identity is rarely met with support. More often than not, it is fiercely resisted. If this resistance then is viewed through the same gender spectacles, it is likely to be branded as false consciousness and complicity in the patriarchy overlooking the fact that these women may have conscious, independent agenda of their own (contrary to the connotations attached with a "weak homogenous mass").

Many characterize the Aurat March as a demonstration of middle-class urban women save some working-class women who are invited to attend. (Saigol and Chaudhry, 2020) The general response to this concern is that rural women and women from the lower strata cannot make it to the march because of socio-economic constraints. No doubt there is some substance in this claim. However, many urban women whose circumstances can afford them a presence in the march do not attend it regardless. This raises a multitude of questions: would women from rural areas and the lower strata resonate with the march and attend it if their circumstances permitted? If women from the working class have to be "invited" to attend the march do they see in the march a potential to change their lives and more importantly, does it not liken the march to a political rally? Is the march representative of the "Aurat" (woman) if only a few hundred women join it? In light of the aforementioned literature, does this empowerment strategy involve agency? Does the march have a transparent needs assessment mechanism? When women who oppose the march are swiftly charged with complicity in perpetuating the patriarchy does this not silence and alienate a significant portion of the country's female population? Does branding these female voices of dissent as cries of caricatured victims of false consciousness not undermine their intellect and agency? If the march is seen as a monopoly on feminist discourse does it risk discourse stagnation on women's rights by excluding a significant portion of the female population? Does the status quo risk perpetuating the belief that women's rights initiatives are inherently Eurocentric and therefore, must never be supported?

Research Design

The current study utilizes the sequential explanatory mixed methods design to gauge public sentiment about the Aurat March. In the first phase of the research, data were collected through a survey instrument to systematically examine the factors impeding mass appeal of the Aurat march. In the second phase, the dimensions identified in the first phase were validated, contextualized, and probed through interviews and focus group discussions. The rationale behind selecting this design is that a multi-method approach to policy research holds potential for understanding complex social phenomena and multiple standpoints that better respond to the multiple stakeholders of policy issues. Feminist research increasingly draws on mixed methods research designs to address complex questions that foster and develop a nuanced understanding of the diversity of lived experiences. (Biber and Griffin, 2016)

Survey

A mixed-mode survey with a combination of open and closed ended questions was circulated through email, face-to-face interaction, text messages and social media. Multiple modes of data collection were employed to enhance representativeness and response rates. The survey was filled by a sample of 245 participants (male = 54, female = 191). The participants ranged from age 18 to 58 and came from different socio-economic backgrounds and provinces. The vast majority of participants were young students from a public research university in Islamabad. This is a strength as well as a limitation; a strength because people from across the country attend the aforementioned university and this is a useful way to increase representation from different provinces and a limitation because all participants were significantly more privileged and educated than the vast majority of the country so their opinions may not be representative of how the average Pakistani views the Aurat March. In a bid to counter this shortfall, I consulted multiple researchers about the possibility of targeting the lower strata but eventually decided otherwise since many people from the lower strata are either not well versed about the march or do not know about it at all; explaining it to the respondents may risk bias. Data were collected from the aforementioned university through two means; first the female dormitory was targeted through door-to-door survey link dispersion in a bid to target women from various socioeconomic, educational and provincial backgrounds reside here and second, email lists were utilized to send the survey link to students of various departments ranging from humanities and art schools to computer science and engineering colleges. Additionally, the survey link was dispersed through social media, text messages and word of mouth.

The closed-ended responses were presented graphically and analyzed using linear regression analysis on SPSS. Open-ended responses were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis guide which includes data familiarization, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report.

Interviews

20 semi-structured interviews were conducted over the phone and face-to-face. The participants were divided in two categories; Group A and Group B. Group A included 12 experts; prominent writers, activists, and Aurat March organizers from different city chapters. Group B included 8 professors and students who volunteered to participate in the interviews after a notice was set up. Participants in Group A were asked questions related to their field of work in connection with the Aurat March and feminist activism in Pakistan. Insider perspectives helped situate, contextualize and assess the validity of the data collected in the survey. Group B were asked similar questions to the survey; this exercise enabled an in-depth exploration of the dimensions identified in the survey. Each session was audio-recorded and lasted approximately 30 minutes. All interviewees had the opportunity to ask questions and read the participant information sheets before they were requested to sign the consent forms.

The audio recordings were transcribed selectively — albeit carefully— excluding the repetitive and redundant information due to time constraints. Transcription was not outsourced because of ethical concerns; the consent forms assured the participants that no personally identifiable data will

be shared with another party. Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis guide was utilized for data analysis.

Focus Group Discussions

10 students from different cities were recruited for two online focus group discussions that spanned approximately 1 hr 30 mins each. An online medium was selected for the participants' convenience given that these sessions were conducted during the Eid holidays. The focus group discussions were an invaluable exercise and entirely distinct from Group A's interviews because they enabled access into a deeper understanding of social interactions and the way they contribute to knowledge construction. Each session was audio-recorded and all participants had the opportunity to ask questions and read the participant information sheets before they were requested to sign the consent forms. The audio recordings were transcribed in a denaturalized manner before Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis guide was employed for data analysis.

Findings

Overall, 275 participants were enrolled in the research and participated in one of two FGDs (n = 10), an interview (n = 20) or the survey (n=245).

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