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Violence against women in politics

The case of Pakistani women's activism

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This paper explores the protest claims of Pakistani women against the everyday oppression of traditional gender roles and the complex backlash they provoke as an instance of violence against women in politics. Taking the annual *Aurat March* (Women's March) as a focal point, I analyze the provocative placards and slogans that have gone viral in both traditional and digital media and investigate the misogynistic counter attacks launched by conservatives, men's rights advocates, and anti-feminists. Contesting narrow definitions of the political in mainstream research, I argue that *Aurat March* protesters and activists *are* women in politics and that counter-discourses, designed to delegitimize the protest and the women's issues it represents, constitute a mode of discursive violence that should be included in scholarly and activist discussions of violence against women in politics.

Keywords: violence against women in politics, discursive violence, *Aurat March*, women in Pakistani politics

1.   Introduction

On the evening of April 23, 2020, one of Pakistan's most beloved mainstream clerics, Tariq Jameel, spoke alongside Prime Minister Imran Khan and prominent journalists on a live telethon in preparation for the Islamic holy month of Ramadan. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country, the cleric suggested that calamities can be a sign of God's displeasure with people. Among the possible causes for divine displeasure, he named widespread dishonesty and deception as well as deviations from good manners, most notably pertaining to female modesty. Implying that immodest behavior correlated with the arrival of the pandemic in the country, Jameel asked accusingly: "Who is making the daughters of the nation dance?" and "Who is making them wear revealing clothes?" (Samaa TV 2020). Usually considered an uncontroversial figure,

Jameel's comments were criticized on social media and condemned by groups such as Pakistan's Human Rights Commission and political figures across party lines, culminating in his issuance of an apology a week later (Shahid 2020).

Jameel's question, *who* is encouraging the "dancing of the nation's daughters" echoed and lent legitimacy to online cyberbullies who regularly harass women for behavior perceived to be liberal and anti-national (Jane 2017). It articulated a general belief among conservative Pakistanis that Western, liberal forces threaten the nation's traditional morality. Using dance as a metaphor for being seen and heard on the streets, Jameel suggests that the 'nation's daughters' are puppets of Western feminism. Appearing in revealing clothing, articulating demands for bodily autonomy, and taking to the streets are sufficient violations to warrant God's scorn.

Jameel's comments resonate in Pakistan, even among political moderates. Just before his election as PM, Imran Khan, once a cricketer who socialized with Britain's elites, said the "Western concept of feminism" was degrading to the role of mothers (Javaid 2018). Khan's assertion echoed the century-old views of Pakistan's 'spiritual' founder, Sir Allama Muhammad Iqbal. A revolutionary figure who promoted a separate state for the Muslims of India, Iqbal disdained feminists because they "distracted the Muslim woman from fulfilling her role as a mother" (Sevea 2012, 181).[1] Iqbal framed 'Western' ways of organizing such as feminist movements as strategies "devised in the name of 'revolution' to serve capitalists interests" (Eijaz and Ahmed 2011). Assumptions about women's primary role as mothers and about feminism as a mode of Western imperialism ground particular forms of violence – discursive and physical – that have been launched against women's rights activists.

Similarly, the *Aurat March*, an annual political demonstration organized in various cities in Pakistan to observe International Women's Day (March 8), has encountered backlash from hardline conservatives in the country, who regard it as the essence of negative Western influences on Pakistani women. The first two *Aurat Marches* drew heavy criticism and online harassment for participants. Condemnations by religious and political leaders incite acts of harm, providing a justification for anti-women violence. In March 2020, for example, some counter protesters part of the *Haya March* or "Modesty March" threw stones at *Aurat March* participants.

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1. Pakistan's 'founding father,' Muhammad Ali Jinnah, had relatively progressive views on women. His sister, Fatima Jinnah, ran for president in the country's early years – with the support of religious conservatives – but lost due to the military's election rigging. A dentist by profession, Fatima Jinnah advocated the importance of the role of motherhood, but also sought to end women's economic dependence on men (Sultana 2003). She never married and was socially ostracized by other elite women as a result.

Rather than treating misogynistic rhetoric only in relation to incitements to physical violence, I analyze this type of speech as a mode of discursive violence. "Sexist hostility and intimidation" should be understood as a kind of violence that can damage women's "desire and ability to take part in politics" (Krook 2020, 84) and discourage them from participating in the public sphere. Discursive violence can have a devastating impact on efforts for gender equity and human rights in a country that was ranked third to last of the 153 nations indexed by the World Economic Forum's 2020 Gender Parity Report. To explore its impact, I analyze backlash against women activists affiliated with the *Aurat March* from 2018 to 2020, examining how discursive violence constricts political opportunity in Pakistan, where women's access to political office is often dynastic in nature.

2.   Violence against Pakistani women and Pakistani women in politics

Violence against women is a global problem but "Pakistan ranks as the sixth most dangerous country in the world for women" (Khan 2019a). Although the country's chief justice recently announced that 1,000 courts would be created countrywide to deal with the issue of domestic violence, "rape, so-called honor killings, acid attacks… and forced marriage – remain a serious problem" (Khan 2019a; Roth 2019). Forms of violence against women go beyond acts of physical harm or coercion. The UN defines Violence against Women (VAW) to be "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life" (UN General Assembly 1993). Sexist discourse that causes psychological harm and constricts liberty falls squarely within the realm of violence against women and should also be construed as political violence.

Most scholars working on Pakistan situate political violence only in relation to actions pertaining to acts of terrorism, an approach that is far too narrow given the breadth of human rights concerns in the region (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2015; Droogan 2018; Fair, Malhotra, and Shapiro 2009). Any analysis of political violence in the Pakistani context must go "well beyond the formal institutions of collective public representation and executive action… [and]…include all arenas of social relations connected with struggles for political power, voice and rights and that engender political subjectivities" (Abraham, Newman, and Weiss 2010, 2). As a category, the *political* has been biased against both women's formal and informal participation in the public sphere. In contrast to political violence that takes place "in public spaces and emanates from political opponents and, in some countries, criminal elements," Violence against Women in Politics (VAWIP), nec-

essarily "takes place in public *and* private spaces. In addition to political opponents and criminals, potential perpetrators include community and religious leaders; state-security forces and police; and media and social-media commentators" (Krook 2020, 82). As recent research on women's electoral participation in the city of Lahore suggests, men remain "gatekeepers of women's engagement with public spaces and activities" (Cheema et al. 2019, 22). Men engender political apathy through "subtle processes that [socialize] women into non-political roles, [resulting] in a 'gendered psyche' that makes women feel invisible and irrelevant to the electoral process" (Cheema et al. 2019, 3).

Violence against women in politics may occur in any "spaces" where women are deemed to be invaders (Puwar 2004, see also Esposito this issue 2021). Thus, a focus on elective offices is insufficient. Although Benazir Bhutto twice held the office of Pakistani Prime Minister (1988–1990, 1993–1996) and gender quotas have increased women's representation in parliament over the past two decades, elective office typically involves a tiny number of carefully selected women (Naz and Mirbahar 2018). Most women in political office in Pakistan have family connections to a political party (UN Women 2014). When politics operates like a family business, it does not encourage the type of independence that poses a threat to the institution of marriage (Wolkowitz 1987). Further, family ties may insulate women officials from misogynist attacks. Maryam Nawaz, for example, daughter of former PM Nawaz Sharif, has over 5 million followers on Twitter. Although, like other female politicians, she received threatening personal attacks online in the lead up to the 2018 election, the majority of unwelcoming public comments she received at that time involved party-based political victimization (Khan 2019b).

Women's rights activists, on the other hand, especially those deemed to be affiliated with feminism, are subjected to far more wide-ranging violence. In contrast to elite political women, these activists pose a threat to conventional gender hierarchies, challenging the conservative fabric of Pakistani society where the "daughters of the nation" reside. Activists' heightened vulnerability to violence can be understood, then, as a form of Violence against Women in Politics (VAWIP), which "has a structural impact in preserving or deepening patriarchal control of the institutions of state" (Bardall 2018, 4). For this reason, a "woman in politics" should refer to not only women in elected office, but also "journalists, judges, academics, activists, and practitioners" (Biroli 2018; Krook 2020). Within this frame, the violence experienced by Malala Yousafzai, the school girl who gained fame after being shot at the orders of the Taliban in 2012,[2] should be construed as VAWIP. So too should less well known cases such as the murders of Sabeen Mahmud (a feminist human rights advocate and founder of a progressive pro-dialogue

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2. On this, see Kienpointner (2020).

non-profit in the southern city of Karachi, shot in 2015 for supporting an ethnic group marginalized by the state as extremists), and social media celebrity Qandeel Baloch (who was asphyxiated in 2016 in the state of Punjab for challenging gender norms and the hypocrisy of religious leaders) (Alam 2020; Boone 2015). In addition to physical violence, these activists suffered discursive violence: nationalist narratives malign them as dupes of foreign powers (Krook and Sanín 2019). For instance, Malala is seen by many Pakistanis as a foreign agent, an instrument of the BBC and other *foreign media* to impugn the state (Kienpointner 2020). Activists who support marginalized Pashtun or Baloch ethnic communities are framed as anti-military; those who challenge religious institutions or support a feminist agenda are denounced as puppets *dancing* to the strings of Western neoliberalism.

Aurat Marchers attempt to disrupt and transform patriarchal discourses, sets of assumptions, frameworks of analysis and interpretation inured in the dominant worldview that have been "naturalized," taken as given, inevitable, and unalterable. They adopt discursive politics as a social change strategy in order to disrupt widely accepted understandings of the world by challenging established definitions, categories, and conceptions; demonstrating the shortcomings of the received view; showing that alternative understandings are possible and mobilizing to win support for significant changes in accepted meanings or "discursive regimes."[3] This challenge to existing authority is countered by violent language that "precedes and accompanies political violence" (Baele 2019, 706). This violent rhetoric deploys "group labels that homogenize and reify social categories in ways that reinforce a dichotomous perception of a fully positive in-group opposing a wholly negative out-group" (Baele 2019, 708). As anti-nationals, anti-military and anti-state entities, *Aurat Marchers* are deemed traitors who align themselves with foreign enemies and against the nation's mothers and daughters who support the nation-state at all costs.

Some scholars conceptualize backlash as "the politics of despair" and, as Mansbridge and Shames (2008) emphasize, "the use of coercive power to regain lost power as capacity" (626). This conceptualization misses key dynamics in Pakistan, however, where state antifeminism, as articulated by cleric Tariq Jameel and current PM Imran Khan, is a reaction from those with coercive power to preclude the *threat* of losing that power to maintain social hierarchy and gender

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3. Developed in the context of poststructuralist understandings of the constitutive power of language, which challenge the idea that language merely describes or represents what exists, suggesting instead that language is constitutive of reality, "discourse" encompasses structures of statements, concepts, categories, and beliefs that are specific to particular socio-historical formations, which constitute us as subjects in a determinate order of things (Hawkesworth 2006).

hegemony (Dupuis-Déri 2016). Vocal women in politics challenge ingrained ideas about women's natural role; they advance claims for women's autonomy and their willingness to confront established power defies notions of Pakistani femininity (Holmes 2008; Wardhaugh 2011; White 1990).

Although men in Pakistan maintain systemic power, men's rights movements emerge in response to women's activism, which is *perceived* as a loss of power. For this reason, I define backlash more broadly as "a response to actual or perceived challenges to existing hierarchies of power" (Flood, Dragiewicz, and Pease 2018, 8; Hawkesworth 1999). Activism inspired by emancipatory political objectives and struggles for freedom from restrictive hierarchies of power can evoke backlash that encompasses discursive and physical violence. In turn, this study looks at how activist attempts to loosen patriarchal constraints in Pakistan are met with various forms of backlash by political actors at diverse social strata.

3.   Multimodal critical discourse studies: Data and methods

The Pakistani women's movement's newest wave seeks visibility. Marches in major cities, television and print media interviews, graphic poster designs, and social media interventions are *affective* political strategies that publicize alternative modes of womanhood. As KhosraviNik (2018, 428) argues, "[t]he appeal of affective political engagement and the rise of Social Media personality politics are, on the one hand, predicated on internalization of the equation: visibility/popularity is legitimacy (derived from accumulated symbolic power, i.e., power is legitimacy) and, on the other hand, works as a revolt against the perceived monolithic nature of traditional mass media/politics". To analyze the substantive challenges to established power orchestrated by *Aurat March* and the forms of backlash evoked, I conducted a discursive study of the social media debates and subsequent TV media and journalistic discussions surrounding the provocative visibility of these activists.

Social media platforms are audio-visual technologies that require multimodal analysis. As "instances of communication" that can be "in any mode or any combination of modes" (Kress 2003, 48), digital technologies integrate many and diverse meaning-making resources. In particular, social media requires interpretation of words and images (see Esposito and Zollo, this issue 2021). As Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, 2) state "[l]ike linguistic structures, visual structures point to particular interpretations of experience and forms of social interaction". With hundreds of thousands contributing to online debates, however, the "nature, location, and dynamic of discursive power in Social Media, or broadly speaking the participatory web, is fluid, changeable, and non-static" (KhosraviNik 2017, 82).

Critical discourse studies are particularly well suited to interrogate the dynamic visual and textual materials that are multiplied and mediated online. Rather than focusing on authorial intention, discursive analysis enables in-depth, contextualized understanding of digital communicative events which "attend systematically to the social interpretation of a range of forms of making meaning" (Jewitt 2013, 250). Informed by notions of ideology critique developed in the Frankfurt School, critical discourse studies suggest that words and images convey conventional meanings – even as they may attempt to disrupt those conventions (van Dijk 1993). By combining analysis of the visual culture tactics of *Aurat March* with the counter attacks launched by Pakistani power wielders and their faithful followers, I will show "how the powerful seek to re-contextualise social practice in their own interests and maintain control over ideology" (Machin 2016, 322–323).[4]

Toward that end, I collected thousands of textual and visual cultural artefacts posted on social and news media sites related to *Aurat March* from March 2018 to May 2020. My most significant dataset comprises 628 protest placards from the 2018 and 2019 *Aurat Marches* – physical posters carried by march participants, photographed by other march participants and journalists but usually not visible on mainstream media. Instead, these images were immediately posted to social media sites including Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, where the viral nature of certain placards, shortly afterwards opened a mainstream media debate. The three *Aurat Marches* generated thousands of placards, most of which were not documented on public social media profiles. The few that sparked critical discussion were not typically ascribable to their original source, often because of backlash fears. In Pakistan, certain vulnerable social media users attempt to keep their social media profiles anonymous to protect their identities from malicious actors online. Because the *Aurat March* is a controversial movement and organization, participants sometimes hide their identities by wearing masks. Some women who marched without masks or publicly posted controversial placards were subjected to so much intimidation that they subsequently hid their profiles.

Hence, for this analysis, I focus on viral placards from the first two marches that were subsequently depicted on news and entertainment media, sparking intense nation-wide debate and discussion. I tracked online Pakistani media sources for mentions of the *Aurat March* every day for four months prior to and following the *Aurat March* protests (2018 to 2020) including, *Dawn News* (English-language newspaper), *The Express Tribune* (English-language newspa-

4. Images posted on social media cannot be representative of the entire Pakistani population. Access to the Internet, internet-enabled technologies and social media usage are class specific. Like everywhere in the world, there is a digital divide, along with capacity gaps that serve as barriers to online participation (Norris 2001).

per), *The Daily Times* (English-language newspaper), *Samaa TV* (news and entertainment network), *Bol Network* (news and entertainment conglomerate), *Neo TV Network* (news channel), *City42* (news channel), and *92 News* (news channel). I focused on material from each of these news sources related to the *Aurat March*, more specifically on viral posts extracted from media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook.

To document the anti-march backlash from February 2019 (online) to April 2020 (offline and online), I turned to a larger off-line discussion surrounding the place of women in Pakistani society. Evidence of said backlash includes 5,109 multi-media engagements from 'Men's March' protestors on Instagram and Twitter, collected using the hashtag #mardmarch ('Men's March). This virtual Men's March, primarily proliferated through a series of 17 counter-placards, taken for social media and circulated online in 2019. The data also includes images from *Haya March* ('Modesty March') counter-protestors in the capital city of Islamabad. This Modesty March was primarily a street counter-protest held by religious conservatives on March 8, 2020 with comparatively little online documentation aside from images documented by news journalists. Although images from these journalistic accounts revealed that there were hundreds of Modesty March protestors, using the hashtag #hayamarch, only 137 unique images affiliated with this counter-movement were found in March 2020. Furthermore, although *Aurat March* (2018–2020) and counter-protests (2020) were documented in news and entertainment media because of their controversial nature, the counter-protest had a smaller following and less online engagement overall.

As each of the *Aurat Marches* were primarily documented through social media, I also analyzed trending hashtags in Pakistan from the three-day window surrounding these three in-person events. This dataset includes more than 110,000 text-only tweets from February 1, 2019 to April 1, 2020 that appeared under the initially most popular hashtag *#Auratmarch* through a streaming API. This form of tweet collecting, part of the "hashtag ethnography" used herein, includes tweets from hashtag users who incorporate the specific term into their posts.[5]

Hashtag ethnography provides one "window" into the *Aurat March* movement. As Bonilla and Rosa (2015, 7) point out, "it is only by stepping through that

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5. Other hashtags, like *#AuratMarch*2019, *#Auratmarch*islamabad or *#Auratazaadimarch* ("women's march for freedom") were so diverse during the 2018–2020 period that they did not carry over each year. In the 2020 protest, for example, the slogan "my body, my choice" translated in Urdu, became a popular hashtag but was spelled differently by protestors, making tweet collection more of a challenge. These complications fueled my decision to concentrate on only one of many *Aurat March* hashtags during this 14-month period.

window and 'following' (in both Twitter and non-Twitter terms) individual users that we can begin to place tweets within a broader context". Hashtag ethnography cannot fully measure impact in this context as protestors and opponents may use multiple languages and may not feel the need to have the attention or association a hashtag can bring. Hashtags are sometimes used as vehicles to popularize other unrelated messages, riding on particular hashtag trends.[6] Cognizant of these limitations of hashtag ethnography, I include some popular tweets in this paper, but my primary emphasis remains the analysis of digital textual and visual protest culture. My analysis of these varied technologies and mediums of communication seeks to illuminate dynamics of power in contemporary Pakistan.[7]

4.   Analysis and discussion

4.1   2018 Aurat March

On March 8, 2018, the first *Aurat March* or Women's March was held in the major Pakistani cities of Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad. Organized by a collective of established NGOs, diverse activists and groups, the March was a celebration of female solidarity, highlighting the oppressive structures that continue to marginalize women and restrict their access to the public sphere at the local and global levels. Demanding equality, the movement's organizers emphasized rights, particularly in relation to class and gender oppression. The 2018 *Aurat March* organizers in Lahore demanded justice, "resources and dignity for women, for the transgender community, for religious minorities and for those on the economic margins but more importantly to recognize that women's liberation is inherently linked with the liberation of all oppressed groups and minorities" (Niazi 2018).

One of the most controversial placards in the March called for "*mera jism, meri marzi*," handwritten in black Urdu[8] script on a bright yellow background (Figure 1). Translated as "my body, my choice," the slogan was originally tied to the 1970s reproductive rights and the abortion debate in the United States, voic-

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6.   Tweet collection also suffers from another drawback: all tweets cannot be collected because Twitter, Inc. has ultimate control over their own data. Available tweets are a sampling of the most recent and relevant tweets issued every minute.

7.   Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) incorporates diverse multimodal approaches, analyzing all the representational modes in play in a text (Zhao et al. 2017; Djonov and van Leeuwen 2018; Unger, Wodak, and KhosraviNik 2016).

8.   Although it is not the first language for most Pakistanis, Urdu is Pakistan's national language. It is one of 6 major languages spoken in the country. I have transliterated each of the Urdu texts that appear in the following images.

ing the pro-choice stance and the fight against the state's control of women's bodies. Decontextualized, recontextualized and transformed for new purposes in the Pakistani context through its translation (van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999; Wodak 2002), this poster triggered a response to the demand for women's bodily autonomy, including freedom of dress. In the Pakistani context, this slogan loses its original aim – as the pro-choice debate is not an issue of foremost concern for most feminists, activists and organizations battling for women's rights in the region. The legal language pertaining to the permissibility of abortion is vague enough to make illegal abortions far less of a critical policy issue (Hadid 2018).

Slogan recontextualization indicates the transitory nature of popular feminism, which gained new energy after the 2016 election of US President Donald Trump. The US Women's March on the day following Trump's inauguration triggered solidarity marches in 81 nations across the globe. In contrast to earlier mobilizations, the co-chairs represented a diversity of feminisms and advocacy positions (Wadell 2017). As in other parts of the world, the women's movement in Pakistan was energized by the 2017 Women's March. Yet, this link to American activism further enabled opponents to cast the *Aurat March* as a foreign conspiracy. That the march was scheduled for "International Women's Day," a non-Eastern holiday, further spurred critics to ignore the pertinence of the issues raised by Pakistani activists and allege mere mimicry of American behavior.

Figure 1. Placard with "My body, my choice" written in Urdu

Another provocative poster, in black handwritten Urdu against an orange background, issued a command, "*Khud khana garam kar lo*" ('Heat the food yourself') (Figure 2). Although the slogan, "my body, my choice," resonates with

transnational feminists throughout the world, this rejection of domestic work is a uniquely Pakistani protest slogan. For those unfamiliar with South Asian culture, this language may not seem too provocative. In countless Urdu and Hindi-speaking homes in the Indian subcontinent, however, this sentiment would be widely understood as rebellious. Whether she works outside the home or is a housewife, a respectful wife is expected to assume responsibility for food preparation. Even in upper-middle class households where food is typically prepared by the household help, a respectful wife is expected to ask if she should heat dinner for her husband when he returns from work. The audacity of a placard insisting that a husband heat his own dinner challenges the gendered division of everyday labor underpinning Pakistani households. These defiant placards sparked debate and criticism, but opponents' voices were not the focus of attention for the majority of news media.[9]

Figure 2. Placard suggesting men heat their own dinner in Urdu

4.2   2019 Aurat March

Encouraged by the success of the previous year's march, 2019 *Aurat March* protests expanded to at least five smaller cities, where thousands of Pakistani women took to the streets marching for their rights on International Women's Day. Their chosen banner proclaimed women's solidarity, *hum aurtain* ('we women'). The March's manifesto was circulated in English and Urdu, highlighting the multipronged demands March organizers made of the state. The manifesto

9. Inspired by this placard, a few months later, a comedic telefilm called "Khana Khud Garam Karo" which cast a demanding wife but was avowedly not feminist in nature was produced and released on Eid, an Islamic holiday (Haq 2018).

"demanded economic justice, implementation of labor rights and the Sexual Harassment Against Women in the Workplace Act 2010, recognition of women's unpaid labor, and the provision of maternity leave and daycare centers to ensure women's inclusion in the labor force" (Azeem 2019). Rather than advocating development-based rights, some activists advanced claims for social emancipation, which stimulated backlash.

Critics reacted with rage to certain placards on display at the March, documented on social media, and in certain instances, modified and spread as fake news by anti-Marchers on platforms like WhatsApp (Masood 2019). A placard held by three women that read "divorced and happy" in English (Figure 3) angered many, some of whom threatened to rape the protestors (Dad 2019). Opponents decried portrayal of divorce as positive, insisting that women are "expected to 'compromise' in order to save their marriage" and protect the institution of marriage (Zehra 2019).

Figure 3. Three protestors hold placard indicating they are divorced and happy

Several posters popularized through the media, challenged traditional gender roles within marriage. Handwritten in black Urdu text, one asked: "Mujhe kiya maloom *tumhara* moza kahan hai?" ('How should I know where *your* sock is?'), emphasizing "your" in red. Like the poster suggesting a husband heat his own dinner, this poster threatened traditional gender norms and a woman's responsibility in the home. Opponents seized upon the suggestion that a wife should shirk her obligation to pick up after her husband as a gross violation of good manners and argued that the arrival of feminism would mean women would no longer even be courteous within a marriage.

Other placards drew rage for their "vulgar" nature, a charge issued by news reports almost immediately after the March (*City42* 2019). Responding to sexual harassment online, one poster that asked men to keep unsolicited photos of their genitalia to themselves was particularly disturbing to anti-marchers who considered the profane language inappropriate (Raheel 2019). Another controversial placard depicted a woman in traditional dress "manspreading" (Figure 4). The Urdu text, "here you go, I'm sitting properly," was denounced as a violation of decency. Similarly, a placard saying, "I'll heat your dinner, [but] heat your own bed" was depicted as vulgar, introducing issues of sexual consent and autonomy – private matters – into the public sphere.

Figure 4. Placard of woman manspreading with corresponding text in Urdu

The perceived shamelessness of the second *Aurat* March drew anger from a number of conservative media personalities, including a member of Pakistan's National Assembly, Aamir Liaquat Hussain. The day after the March, Hussain posted a video, "Horrible Reality," on YouTube, where he has over 100 thousand followers. Stating he did not have a problem with the March itself, Hussain insisted he was ashamed to even repeat some of statements of the March and proceeded to explain why they were religiously inappropriate (Hussain 2019). Following stark criticism of the women carrying these posters, Hussain asserted (inaccurately) that marchers failed to talk about *real* issues faced by the average Pakistani woman such as education or acid-attacks (Hussain 2019). Characterizing the marchers as liberal elites who disrespected the masses, Hussain suggested that march participants were not religious and would turn up their noses at

humanitarian work. Nestled in this YouTube monologue, Hussain claimed: "you spoke against Pakistan and listened to [foreign] agents about what happens here" and requested that PM Imran Khan launch an inquiry to see who sponsored the March (Hussain 2019). Several days later, Orya Maqbool Jan, a conservative columnist expressed his outrage at the marchers, erroneously claiming that none of them discussed women's rights or issues such as women's inheritance rights or stopping forced marriages. According to Jan, the placards "only pictured two things, destroying the family system and ending shame and modesty." Asserting that men as a whole "have been insulted," he claimed that these protestors "would not be allowed to say these things in the newspaper or in a court of law." Even hearing this indecency, he argued, usurped his "fundamental rights" (*Neo TV Network* 2019).

These diatribes are indicative of a tendency observed in Pakistan since the 1980s, i.e. to instrumentalize Islam for political purposes. Forcing women into a "secular/religious binary," this Cold War era framing positions Pakistani women in either the category of "secular, feminist, godless, and Westernized" or "authentic, Islamic, and traditional" (Khan and Kirmani 2018). Conflating expressions of a liberal nature with imports to the "East," conservatives accuse women's rights proponents of falling prey to Western-funded cultural imperialism. In a postcolonial context, the proliferation of NGOs is associated with demobilizing civil society and nationalist struggles (Jad 2007). Foreign-funded NGOs can be accused of being agents of neo-liberalism, pressing for reforms that weaken the state's capacity to provide key social services. Hussain's assertions about the social class of the *Aurat* Marchers ties into this framing. As Moghadam (2015, 56–57) notes, NGO-ized groups "are sometimes described as elitist or 'top-down' groups in which those in charge are separate from the broad base of women, while [grassroots groups] tend to be seen as more local, community based, movement oriented, and more centered around feminist principles of collaboration and power-sharing". Rather than reckon with different varieties of feminism involved in the March, conservatives label all who criticize patriarchal arrangements "inauthentic" and "anti-nationals."

Feminists in Pakistan are not monolithic, however. New articulations of feminism found on social media are not accepted by all grassroots feminists in the country. Placards with messages borrowed from transnational contexts irked more than just the anti-feminists. The 'indecent' posters were also criticized by Kishwar Naheed, a poet and feminist icon in the country, who suggested that these posters were extreme and that the protestors should be mindful of their traditions. Instead of calling themselves "free," Kishwar admonished, women should locate their freedom "in the law, not in [their] bodies and tongues" (*Dawn Images*

2019). Naheed was criticized by some prominent feminists on Twitter, and her statements were used by some opponents of the March (Khatri 2020).

The 2019 March was also condemned by the Assembly of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, an especially conservative province in the northwest of the country. Reacting to perceived obscenity in certain placards, a resolution introduced by a conservative female politician, Rehana Ismail, stated: "[s]ome hidden forces have sped up their efforts to destroy our family system and social customs, the practical demonstration of which took place on March 8, 2019, in various big cities on Women's Day" (Hayat and Akbar 2019; Ismail 2019).

Further, the 2019 March "sparked a wave of masculine anxiety," not limited to well-known conservative figures (Zahra-Malik 2019). Armed with the messages of the *Aurat March*, opposition to the March grew as a small number of men's rights protestors organized a campaign on social media sites like Twitter and Instagram. Proposing a *Mard March* ('Men's March'), Karachi-based media company FHM encouraged young men to post pictures on Facebook. Holding handwritten posters in Urdu, one man commanded, "forget the sock, find your scarf." Another said "get your own credit card," and yet another asked when '"Gents First" would come, suggesting that "Ladies First"' is already here. One men's rights supporter queried, "I'm supposed to give you your rights, but who will give me mine?" Another asked, "You are someone's sister or daughter, aren't I someone's brother or son?" (Srivastav 2019). The few hundred online *Mard Marchers* were mocked extensively on Twitter and Facebook, which dissolved any plans for an offline march (Bose 2019).

Beyond the *Mard March* campaign, *Aurat March* protestors were subjected to "online bullying, harassment, and even rape threats" (Masood 2019, on rape culture see also Kopytowska this issue 2021). The March organizers had to deal with much worse, "forcing many to limit their activity on social media for a time" (Masood 2019). As data scientist Rizwan Saeed documented, much of the harassment came from cyberbullies who deactivated their accounts or were suspended by Twitter within 20 days of the March (Javaid 2020).

Backlash against the March did not stop at online harassment. Months after the 2019 *Aurat March*, a group called PJEON (Organization for Peace, Justice and Education) petitioned the High Court in the capital city, Islamabad, to declare the posters from the 2019 March un-Islamic in nature (Bose 2019). Citing slogans such as "my body, my choice" and "don't worry about my marriage, worry about my freedom" as evidence (Rashid 2019), PJEON sought to invoke Pakistan's blasphemy laws, which carry penalties ranging from fines to death sentences, against the March organizers. The Court dismissed the case as propaganda, but critics continue to mobilize against the *Aurat* Marchers' demands for free speech and bodily autonomy throughout the upcoming year.

4.3   2020 Aurat March

In November 2019, *Aurat March* organizers issued a colorful social media call for action in preparation for the 2020 *Aurat March*. Within hours, they received thousands of vile, sexist comments from an online troll army making "rape, death and various attack threats" towards the organizing committee and other *Aurat March* team members (Global Villiage Space 2019). The threats were reported to both Facebook and the police (*Express Tribune* 2019). In February 2020, activists and organizers put up posters announcing the March 8 event; a number of which were torn down in counter-protest (Pundir 2020). The same month, orthodox party leaders, including Maulana Fazal-ur-Rehman, president of the religious party Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-F. ("Party of Islamic Scholars," JUI-F) stated that if the *Aurat March* occurred, they would forcefully stop it by arranging a counter-protest to occur simultaneously (*Daily Times* 2020).

Just days before the protest, conservatives again approached the High Court in Lahore and Islamabad to ban the *Aurat March* on the grounds of obscenity. Instead, the courts granted permission for the March to take place (Hussain 2020; Rashid 2020). On March 3, 2020, members of the banned extremist group Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) vandalized an unfinished mural on a private home. Alleging obscenity, they insisted that the depiction of two women violated *shariah* or Islamic law, which, strictly interpreted, would prohibit the drawing of portraits. The painting showed one woman with her head covered in a turban-style hijab and one woman without a head covering (Figure 5). The SSP spray-painted the women's faces and exposed forearms in black, accompanied with the Urdu words, "not allowed" and "against" (*Images* 2020).
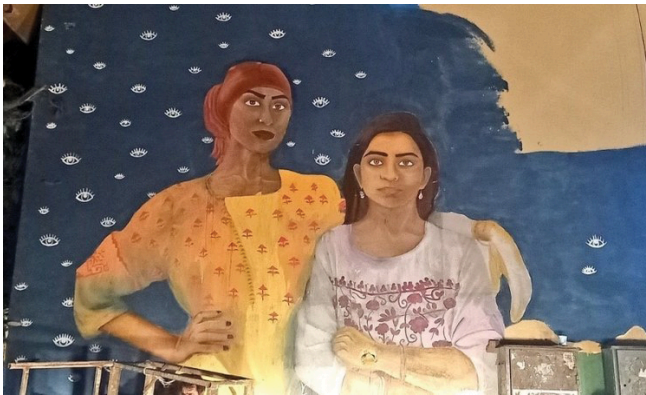

Figure 5. Aurat March mural before being defaced

After the courts gave permission for the March to continue, a news channel invited an orthodox senator, a journalist, and a respected writer to discuss the March. The orthodox senator, Maulana Faiz Muhammad denounced the indecent language of the previous year's protest, saying "he did not know how a Muslim's daughter could repeat words such as 'my body, my choice,' as bodies are God-given and governed by God's will" (*Neo TV Network* 2020). From this religious perspective, any reference to "my choice" is provocative because devout Muslims submit themselves to God and conform to sacrosanct rules pertaining to corporeal deportment, especially in public.

Oppostion to the 2020 *Aurat March* was not restricted to the country's most orthodox groups. Appearing with Maulana Faiz Muhammad, award-wining writer and lyricist Khalil-ur-Rehman Qamar, whose recent TV serial (*Meray Paas Tum Ho* 'I Have You' 2019) received record-breaking ratings, articulated his antagonism to the slogans on the basis of morality rather than religion (*Neo TV Network* 2020). Qamar suggested that women should be happy with their husband's salaries and take pride in their own economy, culture and clothes (*Neo TV Network 2020*). For him embracing the idea of divorce would be damaging to society (*Neo TV Network* 2020). Qamar made no distinction between emancipatory slogans and rights-based claims. He ridiculed placards demanding an end to acid attacks, by questioning their validity: "Are all men just standing there with a bottle of acid?" (*Neo TV Network* 2020).

When US-based Pakistani journalist Marvi Sarmad – the only woman on the panel – repeated the slogan "*Mera jism, meri marzi*" ('My body, my choice'), Qamar became perturbed. Asserting his right to speak, Qamar yelled at Sarmad to stop interrupting him, called her dumb, ill-mannered and immodest, and asked her "what is in your body anyway?" He taunted her to "go look at it" and railed that "he wouldn't even spit on her." Qamar's refusal to engage in reasoned discussion and reversion to insult cost him a media deal, citing his lack of civility and his indecency towards Sarmad (*Neo TV Network* 2020, *Geo News* 2020). The intensity of views expressed in this interview illuminates two strains of anti-March backlash. Although the orthodox criticize the March on religious grounds and nationalists claim anti-state agendas, Qamar manifests a gendered response to the March similar to that of the young netizens in the *Mard March*. Speaking in defense of masculinity, Qamar indicates a profound ignorance of gender inequity in Pakistan while insisting that violence by some men can be dismissed as long as it is not characteristic of all men.

Despite these tumultuous denunciations and threats of violence, *Aurat March* organizers continued undeterred (Asher 2020). The 2020 *Aurat March* Lahore manifesto demanded an end to economic violence, violence against bodies, and state violence, and progress toward environmental justice, reproductive justice,

non-discrimination, protection for the rights of religious minorities and democratic rights (*Aurat March* Lahore 2020). On March 8, 2020, protestors once again took to the streets to voice these demands. The Urdu rendition of "my body, my choice" became a hashtag and a protest chant. Although the 2020 *Aurat March* was well-attended and the placards were powerful and creative, they did not garner as much attention from the media as they had in previous years.

Emboldened by orthodox clerics with political power, conservatives launched a small countermarch, self-branded as *Haya March* (Modesty March) in the capital city of Islamabad. Most of the counter-protestors were peaceful, carrying signs in defense of women's traditional roles in national culture and religion. One woman representing a large religious women's group called *Minhaj ul Quran* ('Path of the Quran'), for example, held a sign in Urdu that stated: "I am modest, I am prestigious" (Figure 6). Some counter-protesters, however, threw stones and batons at *Aurat* Marchers in Islamabad, before being restrained by the police (*Newsweek Pakistan* 2020).

Figure 6. Haya March protestor holding pro-modesty placard

Although there had been no trending counter-march or backlash hashtags in Pakistani Twitter in 2018 or 2019, fourteen trending counter-march hashtags surfaced in Pakistan on International Women's Day in 2020. These counter march hashtags include: #merahijabmerimarzi ('my headscarf my choice'), #strongwomen_strongnation, #tributetokashmiriwomen,[10] #banantiislamvulgarmarch, #stop*Aurat*barbadimarch ('stop the ruination of women march'), #ourwomenourpride, #womeninislam, #islamprotect_womendignity, #hayamarch ('modesty march'), #womendignitywalk, #womendignitymarch, #werejectmerajismmerimarzi ('we reject my body my choice'), #مشرقی_عورت (#*Mashriki_Aurat*, 'eastern woman') and #نامنظور_مارچ_فحاشی (#*Fahashi_march_namanzoor*, 'vulgar march rejected'). These hashtags, are further evidence of the growing resistance against *Aurat March* and the women's issues it politicizes.

5.   Understanding violence against women's activism in Pakistan

Photographs posted on social media afford *visibility* to women's political participation. Although a written tweet may become the focus of violent contention, an image of a human being participating in a movement of hundreds or thousands evokes a different, more powerful impression. In the case of *Aurat March* placards described here, not only is a woman on public streets demanding social change, but also her issues cannot be readily dismissed as marginal when supported by such large numbers of protestors. Women in the streets *en masse* challenge the heavily gendered public-private distinction in Pakistan, raising a potential threat to male control over the public sphere and male dominance of media resources. Indeed, with the use of information and communication technologies, women's movements throughout the world have increased access to information, enabling trends in protest. As Youngs (2015, 858) notes "digital public spheres have transformed the informational and communicative patterns of industrial times, and feminist activism and advocacy have contributed to creating many new patterns". Among these are the texts of popular feminism, present in visual protest culture, as well as consumer culture (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2017).

Although the women's movement in Pakistan has been active in combating anti-women laws for decades, the movement's current momentum, propelled by knowledge of digital networks that communicate popular feminism, has stretched the nature women's activism in Pakistan so that it is no longer oriented solely

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10.   Women of Kashmir, a disputed territory between India and Pakistan, where human rights violations have been increasing under the administration of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, are seen as "real victims" that should be the focus of such protest attention.

towards the state (Shaheed 2019).[11] Women's activism has a long history in Pakistan, but I contend the *Aurat March* has encountered unprecedented backlash because of this expanded agenda. In contrast to development or security concerns, claims related to social change and freedom of speech are perceived as provocative. The current wave of women's activism is unprecedently diverse but this diversity is masked as references to "International Women's Day" and 'Western' values are characterized as a threat to national culture. Claims of bodily autonomy are conflated with claims of sexual liberation, as conservatives insist that Western feminism undermines Islamic values. Occurring both online and offline and challenging society *as well as* the state, the *Aurat March* is particularly susceptible to violence. This societal challenge exceeds critiques of gender norms, extending to demands for social and economic equality that remain grave concerns for the country.

Social media is often depicted as a progressive force. In the words of Youngs (2015, 864), "digital developments represent a new era of liberation focused on new potential for sharing knowledge toward greater empowerment to act for social change in women's interests". But calls for empowerment can meet with negative as well as positive reactions. *Aurat* Marchers' creative societal critiques engendered an expanded range of antifeminist and anti-liberal backlash activity. Although the women's marches were largely peaceful, the critical language used against the movement by popular, religious, and political figures culminated in physical violence and continues in countless other forms. Misogynistic backlash, exemplified in the silencing, ridiculing and dismissing of women's concerns should be understood as discursive violence. The backlash, too, is complex, transcending arguments against gender-equality or women's rights *per se*. The rise of discourses in defense of masculinity and men's rights reflect newly visible versions of Pakistani machoism. Recourse to a "not all men" stance denies very real violence that women face. Masculinist backlash engenders claims for men's rights as articulated by the *Mard March* or Men's March.

Although much of this misogynistic violence is not publicly witnessed online, a recent report by the Pakistan-based *Digital Rights Foundation* finds the majority

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11. Like women in other post-colonial contexts, many women active in early Pakistani politics were politically engaged during the struggle for independence from the British, where they also pushed for women's rights. When Muslim women first took to the streets in 1940, protesting the arrest of their party leaders in the All-India Muslim League, they were criticized by the press as being shameless, but continued to protest injustices. After the violent partition from India in 1947, Pakistani women from privileged backgrounds held a handful of political positions, but were not made center-stage. When women protested the state's misuse of Islamic texts to create anti-women laws in 1979, this small cohort of activists were educated professionals familiar with the stakeholders and tactfully negotiated change. See Saigol (2016).

of journalists and information practitioners like activists are subjected to online abuse and harassment – threats that can result in physical violence offline (Jahangir 2020). Online environments have witnessed a crackdown on information practitioners, with "reports of surveillance and clampdowns online [becoming] frequent after the ruling Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf government announced its plans to regulate social media" in 2018 (Jahangir 2020, 4). Likewise, US-based social media giants "have failed to protect women from developing countries because they fail to understand the language and cultural context in which the harassment takes place" (Jahangir 2020, 6–7). The prevalence of these backlash tactics in the everyday lived-experiences of Pakistani women should not divert attention from the virulence of the harm they inflict. The *Aurat March* organizers and participants who dare to communicate their aims and advocate for a more just state for all Pakistanis are political women. The discursive, psychological, and physical violence they experience should be understood as violence against political women. Absent such recognition, manifold harms will remain unaddressed even as political opportunities widen for women who demand their rights. Enduring violence ought not to be a condition for political participation.

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