



Women marching for solidarity: 5 years of Aurat March in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan

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Abstract

In this paper, I argue that the Aurat March (Urdu: Woman March) in Pakistan has developed from a one-off event to a social movement that operates according to a populist logic as articulated by Ernesto Laclau (2018). I demonstrate how a diverse array of women's demands is linked by a chain of equivalence to create solidarity between disparate communities of women. Here, all protestors define themselves in opposition to a common enemy, the patriarchy, allowing for a wide array of marginalized ethnic, religious and gender identities to be subsumed under the Aurat March banner. The slogan *mera jism meri marzi* (Urdu: my body, my choice) acts as a signifier that becomes increasingly empty, allowing a variety of demands to be projected upon it. I analyze conservative discourses around the Aurat March to demonstrate how right-wing detractors attempt to fill the empty signifier with morally charged content that disrupts the solidaric bonds holding together the Aurat March coalition. Finally, I explain how Aurat March organizers attempt to restore the openness of their signifier and the solidarity at the heart of their movement.

Keywords Women's movements · Populism · Solidarity · Protest

Introduction

In 2016, the election of Donald Trump, an unabashed sexual predator, as president of the USA sparked women's protests nationwide that inspired demonstrations in countries across the globe—including the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. While the women's march in the USA has since lost steam, its Pakistani counterpart called the Aurat March (Urdu: woman march) remains a household name. The Pakistani Aurat March is a yearly event held in different cities across the country on March 8, International Women's Day. At the marches, women, gender minorities, and cis male allies gather to sing, dance, and march in the streets with their colorful

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homemade placards featuring (often cheeky) slogans in Urdu and English. Photos of the marchers and their slogans quickly went viral on Pakistani social media, igniting a firestorm of controversy and a nationwide conversation about women's rights, gendered social norms, and female presence in public spaces in the Islamic Republic (Ebrahim 2019).

The slogans and the women who raise them are regularly excoriated as shameless, vulgar, and obscene, supposedly representing the agenda of a godless secular liberal elite and not that of "real" Pakistani women. Even among feminists, prominent voices have questioned whether the slogans go too far, alienating the majority of the population, which tends to be religious and conservative (Dawn Images 2019). One particular slogan—*mera jism meri marzi* (Urdu: my body my choice)—became a focal point for criticism.

The backlash has meant the Aurat March is not without risks for organizers and participants. After the second annual march in 2019, a video of religious cleric Manzoor Mengal went viral in which he equated *mera jism meri marzi* with a free-sex culture that would allow men to also follow their own will and rape women with impunity (Ahmed 2019). Afterwards, organizers received a flood of threats, prompting several to curtail their social media presence (Dawn 2019). The 2020 Aurat March in Islamabad was called off early when counter-protesting madrasa students attacked marchers with a hail of stones while the police scattered in panic (The News 2020). In 2021, opponents of the march went so far as to doctor videos of Aurat marchers chanting slogans, making it appear that they contained blasphemous slurs (Dawn 2021). In Pakistan, blasphemy is a crime carrying the death sentence, yet mere accusations regularly inspire violent lynch mobs and assassins to mete out vigilante justice before cases can come to trial.

Even as religious conservatives like Mengal excoriate the slogan *mera jism meri marzi* (my body my choice; hereafter MJMM) and the march for their supposed vulgarity, some feminist writers and academics celebrate this as the unprecedented breaking of taboo around female sexuality, symbolizing a radical new path forward in the Pakistani women's movement (Khatri 2019; Rehman 2019; Saigol and Chaudhary 2020; Batool and Malik 2021; Zia 2022). Meanwhile, other commentators deny that MJMM is about sexual pleasure and autonomy at all but claim the slogan has been grossly misunderstood or willfully misrepresented as such (Asfand 2020; Husain 2020; Razzaque 2021; Hyat 2022). Love it or hate it, MJMM has become synonymous with the Aurat March itself.

In this paper, I am less interested in discerning what the slogan or the march "really" stands for than in understanding what the slogan is able to *do* with respect to the internal solidarity of a nascent social movement. Following a brief overview of solidarity in the Aurat March and Pakistani women's movements more generally, I will demonstrate how MJMM functions as an empty signifier (Laclau 2018) that serves to unite a plurality of demands brought by Aurat marchers from diverse backgrounds. In the second half of the paper, I trace how solidarity is disrupted as the movement becomes highly visible and its empty signifier affixed to "controversial" content. Here, my discourse analysis illuminates the discursive environment in which the slogan is circulating, which affects how the slogan can be interpreted (namely: as controversial) by Pakistani publics. Finally, I argue that maintaining the

“emptiness” of the empty signifier by suggesting more palatable interpretations of the slogan is a strategic move on the part of activists to preserve the solidarity at the heart of their diverse coalition. In doing so, my perspective contrasts with voices who suggest that such a move would constitute a betrayal of the movement’s core values (Khatri 2019).

My arguments are made on the basis of interviews with current and former march organizers and participants, my own participant observation at Aurat Marches and mobilization events, and an archive of media coverage in Urdu and English, including newspaper articles, YouTube videos, social media posts, and clips from Urdu TV talk shows. My fieldwork was conducted in Karachi between October 2021 and December 2022; all conclusions drawn pertain only to the Karachi Aurat March, though I refer simply to “Aurat March” throughout.¹

Setting the scene

The question of solidarity, particularly between women of different socio-economic classes, runs through the literature on the Aurat March and Pakistani women’s movements in general. Although there are several useful approaches to solidarity from a feminist perspective (Dean 1996; Mohanty 2003), I work within a Laclauian theoretical frame that defines solidarity as the holding together of a movement’s disparate demands through an equivalential chain in pursuit of a singular cause (Laclau 2018). Historians note that early female activists’ choice of issues in post-partition Pakistan was largely shaped by their class status; many were wives of public officials and not interested in disrupting the political status quo, preferring to focus on philanthropic work through charity organizations like the All Pakistan Women’s Association (APWA) (Ansari 2009, 1423). When elite women did finally take to the streets in agitations that contributed to the eventual passage of the Muslim Family Law Ordinance in 1961, this foray into politics was not on behalf of Pakistani women writ large but constituted a gesture of solidarity with their aggrieved sister Hamida Muhammad Ali, who found her position as First Lady suddenly challenged when her prime minister husband took a second wife (Ansari 2009, 1426). Scholarly accounts of the women’s movement that center street protests of the 1980s against dictator Zia-ul-Haq’s so-called Islamic laws (discussed in detail later) note the movement’s failure to attain broad support beyond its mostly upper/upper-middle class, educated, English-speaking base in the urban areas (Khan 2019). Ayesha Jalal contends that the “convenience of subservience” for women from comfortable homes explains their failure to make meaningful linkages with those from other walks of life or to take seriously the impacts of the Zia laws, which were felt most acutely by poor women (1991).

¹ Since the marches began in 2018, the number of urban centers hosting Aurat Marches has increased year by year and as of publication includes cities such as Lahore, Islamabad, Hyderabad, Sukkur, Quetta, and Ghotki; the marches are loosely affiliated but have their own organizing committees and make organizing decisions independent of one another.

The Karachi Aurat March paints a contrasting picture to earlier elite-led movements. While some organizers have a higher class background, others do not, and march attendees include women and gender minorities from a variety of socio-economic, religious, ethnic, and geographical backgrounds. The march has adopted a non-hierarchical structure in which all who help plan the event bear the equal title of organizer. While the March strives for non-hierarchy, there is a core organizing committee whose members tend to bear the brunt of key logistical and decision-making responsibilities, and several (though by no means all) of these women are wealthy, well-connected, educated, and English-speaking. Measures are taken to make leadership committees as inclusive as possible; for example, holding meetings in Urdu, encouraging Whatsapp communication via voice notes instead of written text messages, gathering in centrally located areas of Karachi instead of elite enclaves like the Defense Housing Authority (DHA), and showing up for issue-specific protests as they arise in local communities throughout the year. Still, organizers' acknowledge that it has been difficult to sustain engagement with local communities and to even out power dynamics within the central organizing committee that inevitably rise from members' positions of differential privilege in terms of free time, transportation and mobility, material resources, social networks, political connections, personal economic freedom, etc. However, the accusations of elitism continuously leveled at the Aurat March are far too simplistic. Dismissing the Aurat March as an elite women's movement hearkens back to older class-based anxieties around "willful" women who corrupt and lead their "good" middle class sisters astray (Jamal 2006), interpellating women of lower classes as wards to be protected rather than full sui juris citizens who are equally capable of making the free decision to march.

Many of those who choose to march are ground-level social activists embedded in Karachi's various local communities, including church leaders, members of the indigenous fisherfolk community, and residents of *katchi abadis* (informal settlements). These grassroots activist-organizers recruit march participants from among their social networks, making the Aurat March a truly cross-class movement. These marchers, in turn, bring with them a diversity of demands that reflect not one cause but many. Lady health workers come demanding better pay, working conditions, and healthcare while Christian and Hindu women demanding an end to kidnapping, forced conversion, and marriage of young minority girls. Fisherfolk women came demanding environmental protections and more hospitable conditions for fishing, alongside climate change activists demanding government action to reduce carbon emissions—not to mention the multitudes bearing placards condemning harassment, violence against women, honor killing, sexual abuse, femicide, and patriarchal notions of modesty and honor.

While the Aurat March occurs only once a year, it has been lauded for sparking the rejuvenation of a women's movement coopted by "NGO-isation" since the 1990s (Batoool and Malik 2021). In a country like Pakistan, where public spaces are highly male-dominated, women taking to the streets is a powerful symbolic gesture and an empowering embodied experience for those who march.² Young participants cite

² The spatial aspect of the Aurat March cannot be overstated, especially considering the history of Zia's Islamization program, which emphasized pushing women out of public spaces and into the confines of *chadar* and *chaar diwaari* (the veil and four walls of the home). In meetings I attended, some organizers

the Aurat March and its controversial slogans as an opening to make the personal political, prompting previously taboo conversations with their parents and relatives about gender roles in the home. Grassroots activists who mobilize in their communities speak of the march as an important first exposure to feminist principles and the concept of women's rights for women without formal education who would not otherwise have known they possess rights at all. Housewife-turned-activist Khalida Pirzado describes first realizing she was a feminist during a conversation with an Aurat March organizer, who pointed out: all that stuff you're already doing in your daily life, that's feminism! The march was also an early foray into street politics for Pirzado's daughter Virsa, who is currently one of the only female presidents of a major leftist student organization at Federal Urdu University in Karachi. She remembers marching alongside other women at the Aurat March as a formative experience that helped her build the confidence to take the megaphone at protests led by her own (highly male-dominated) organization.

Why has the Aurat March succeeded in drawing a diverse crowd where past iterations of the women's movement in Pakistan have failed? Five years after the first march, what is it that brings participants back every year—even though their diverse causes do not necessarily share ideological common ground? Is this success sustainable into the future, even as some marchers speak of dwindling crowds?³ In the following, I ask what the Karachi Aurat March can tell us about solidarity within popular movements: the conditions under which it becomes possible; how it is crafted, created, and brought into being by activists and marchers alike; and how and why it eventually dissolves, or threatens to dissolve.

The Aurat March and its populist logic: the emergence of *Aurat* as popular identity around an empty signifier

At first glance, it is easy to assume solidarity at the Aurat March rises naturally out of a common socio-biological experience of “womanhood.” However, the popular identity of “woman” is not pre-given and, in fact, has expanded and morphed as the movement is grown. The first Karachi Aurat March call for participation mentioned only women and non-binary folks. By 2022, the call on social media explicitly welcomed every woman (cis or trans), trans man, Khwajasira,⁴ and non-binary person to join as organizer (Aurat March Karachi 2022). Though they are not allowed in the organizing committee, cis-men are still welcome to march as allies and supporters,

Footnote 2 (continued)

floated the suggestion to change the event's format from a march to a conference or *mela* (fair, expo). The attendees overwhelmingly rejected these suggestions in favour of marching; participants agreed that coming out into the streets was important to them.

³ Claims about attendance can only be anecdotal; as far as I know, there are no official statistics collected.

⁴ Khwajasira refers to the indigenous community of feminine-identifying individuals who were assigned male at birth or born with intersex characteristics and live in households structured by the *guru-chela* (teacher-student) relationship; in other South Asian contexts sometimes called *hijra* or third gender.

many of whom bring their own causes. At the 2022 march, I observed a group of (apparently cis-male) anarchists protesting the war in Ukraine while another (apparently cis-male) protestor held a placard condemning the family sexual abuse he had faced as a child. It seemed the event had become a collecting place for a variety of marginalized voices.

To help make sense of this, I find it helpful to examine the Aurat March through the lens of populism. Recent years have seen an upswing in so-called populist movements across the Global North, most significantly in the Brexit movement in the UK and the election of American President Donald Trump. Drawn largely from these and other Euro-American case studies, many in academic and public discourse have theorized populism as an aberration to democracy (Müller 2016) that is essentially exclusionary (Espejo 2015) and repressive of diversity (Abts and Rummens 2016), a force against which liberal democratic institutions must be protected. Yet as Partha Chatterjee reminds us, populism has a long history in other parts of the world beyond its contemporary manifestations in Europe and the USA. He suggests that, with a shifting of the world order after World War II, aspects of popular sovereignty that were always apparent in the peripheries are suddenly being laid bare in the center as well (Chatterjee 2019).⁵ If we want to take democracies in the Global South seriously as democracies in their own right and not merely flawed carbon copies of a Western ideal, we need to turn our attention to democracies' local materializations. This, Chatterjee insists, can also help us understand struggles over popular sovereignty as they emerge in the Global North as well.

Most theorists agree that populist movements seek to construct a “people” in opposition to some adversary (Glynos and Howarth 2008; Mouffe 2013; Laclau 2018; Chatterjee 2019). Argentinian political philosopher Ernesto Laclau's theory of populism is important because it can account for movements both by minorities demanding greater inclusion in the national body as well as majoritarian fascists demanding their exclusion. This understanding brings attention to the way populist movements can revitalize democracy rather than inevitably undermining it (Mouffe 2005). Though colloquially used as a pejorative term, Laclau claims that populism only describes a political logic by which demands link together to form popular identities that define themselves in opposition to a constituent outside (i.e. an Other). Any popular movement, from white nationalists in the USA to Aurat marchers in Pakistan, can operate according to this logic. A popular identity of any ideological stripe is forged out of the linkage between unmet demands that collect in what he calls a chain of equivalences. Left unmet, this chain coalesces into an “us,” negatively defined against a common enemy “them,” who fail to meet the demands. In this process, one demand is emptied of its original specificity, becoming the universal symbol or signifier of the movement as a whole. As individual links identify

⁵ Comaroff and Comaroff go so far as to suggest that “Europe is evolving toward Africa,” by which they mean that, with the expansion of neoliberal capitalism and the erosion of the social state, trends in the Global North appear to be mirroring trends in the Global South (2012). We might include populism among these trends.

with the universal symbol (in Laclauian language: an empty signifier) in opposition to a common enemy, a new popular identity is forged.

I argue that the Aurat March follows just such a populist logic. For one, all demands are grounded on a lack; a rupture or breakdown in the social order gives rise to them. It is exactly this antagonism that solidifies the identity of the *Aurat* (woman)—or perhaps we should say, the “Aurat marcher”—as popular identity. When I asked Aurat marchers what it means to be a woman, or if we can even say there is such a thing as a common female experience, nearly everyone said the same thing: all of us have suffered; all of us have been subjected to violence at the hands of men. This move to define *Aurat* negatively against an antagonistic patriarchal outside gives this sense of solidarity in marginalization despite difference, a solidarity that did not exist before. The simultaneous solidification of both the *Aurat* (marcher) as protesting subject, and the patriarchy in all its manifestations as the common enemy also widens the category of woman beyond its biological rootedness to include all subjectivities marginalized by patriarchy.

Key to the crystallization of a singular popular identity, the *Aurat* (marcher), out of so many disparate demands and pre-existing subjectivities is the ability of all to rally around a common signifier. The slogan MJMM quickly became a symbol of the movement for both activists and opponents.⁶ As columnist and march supporter Irfan Husain puts it, “Let’s not kid ourselves: ‘mera jism, meri marzi’ (my body, my choice) is not a mere slogan. It is a call to arms” (2020). It is precisely because all these different demands—from forced conversion to living wages to environmental protection—share a common attachment to MJMM that they remain connected despite each demand having its own content which inevitably produces tension or contradiction with other demands. Organizer Moneeza Ahmed emphasized this when she spoke about the slogan:

We try to bring everything together. And to be honest, sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn’t work. Sometimes in some years we introduce some *naras* (slogans) and note that they don’t become popular. And then everyone’s like Oh MJMM—yeah, yeah that’s our *nara*! [...] I think the movement needs this kind of stuff. Like it can’t always be specific issues, it has to be something

⁶ MJMM garnered media attention from the time it was first raised during the original Aurat March in 2018. However, it was not until 2 years later that an on-air altercation between two panelists on an Urdu talk show from Neo News propelled the slogan (and with it the march) to peak virality. On the show, march supporter Marvi Sirmed began chanting the slogan to drown out a tirade of criticism by Urdu TV drama writer Khalil-ur-Rehman Qamar. Qamar responded by shouting misogynistic profanities and insults at Sirmed on live television as the host struggled to regain control. The altercation became fodder for further talk show discussions, opinion columns, Twitter chatter, and feminist rage (Habib 2020). The day the incident occurred, March 4, 2020, saw mentions of *mera jism meri marzi* spike to an all-time high on Twitter with over 108,000 mentions (by comparison, the second most mentions in a single day following this incident only reached 20,000)—the overwhelming majority of which denounced the slogan and expressed support for Qamar (Source: Twitter data scrape collected between January 1, 2009, and July 18, 2022 by Christoph Malte Marx). Anecdotally, march organizers concur that this was the turning point after which the slogan became widely known—and largely interchangeable with the Aurat March itself. March organizers made a conscious decision to embrace the slogan going forward instead of disavowing it.

deeper and who we are, the essence of [the march].. and that's why I think *mera jism meri marzi* is a very essence *nara*.

As Ahmed explains, MJMM here does not describe a common denominator or characteristic shared by all differential demands; rather, it is a component part of the chain that symbolically stands in for the whole and to which participants relate as a kind of “essence” of the movement. The inherent vagueness or emptiness of MJMM as the basis for solidarity should not be seen as a negative reflection on the movement's ideological coherence. As Laclau notes, “The empty character of the signifiers that give unity or coherence to a popular camp is not the result of any ideological or political under-development: it simply expresses the fact that any populist unification takes place on a radically heterogeneous social terrain” (2018, 98). It is exactly the constituent emptiness of MJMM that is productive of solidarity between the diverse social groups that march together every year.

It is important to remember that the movement as discourse that Laclau theorizes does not arise in a vacuum but is embedded in a discursive context of its own. This discursive context influences how certain demands can be heard, read, and understood. Media environments that operate according to the logics of communicative capitalism (Dean 2009) make it increasingly easy for empty signifiers to be captured by hostile actors and imbued with negative meaning, effectively destroying their unifying potential (Schaflechner and Kramer, this issue). In order to understand how a slogan like MJMM can be interpreted—and eventually captured—in Pakistan, and what impact this has on the movement and its solidaric potentials, we need to understand how a certain gendered religio-nationalistic ideology permeates Pakistan public spheres, acting as a prism through which the slogan can be read—by those within the movement and by wider publics.

Gender, sexuality, and the nation in Pakistani public discourses

At this point, it is helpful to provide some historical context with regard to notions of gendered citizenship in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. With the advent of post-colonial theory in the social sciences, scholars increasingly took up the task of “provincializing” (Chakrabarty 2009) normative concepts, including secularism, the public sphere, and democratic citizenship (Fraser 1990; Asad 2003; Mahmood 2005) that have their origins in the canon of Western political theory. Scholars pushed back against the assumption of these concepts' universal explanatory power, emphasizing instead their regional specificity and historical contingency. In a similar vein, post-colonial feminist political theorists highlight the ways in which the concept of the nation is inherently gendered, resulting in women's fundamental exclusion from certain aspects of supposedly universal citizenship rights (Yuval-Davis 1993). Abstractly, women serve as symbols for the collective (think of Mother Russia, or *Bharat Mata* in the Indian context); on a more concrete level, women constitute the site of biological and cultural reproduction of the nation through their role producing and raising children (Yuval-Davis 1993).

In Pakistan, the state and the normative Pakistani citizen are imagined in both gendered and religiously marked terms: as individual, rational, Sunni-Muslim, and male; while the nation is imagined as a collective and marked as female (Saigol 2003). These imaginaries are constructed and communicated through various cultural productions, which citizens both reinforce and resist at different times and in different ways (Saigol 2003; Shaikh 2017; Khoja-Moolji 2021). The “two nation theory” out of which Pakistan was born also fused national (Pakistani) honor and religious (Muslim) honor and located this in the bodies of women, who became responsible for upholding the purity of the nation from the pollution of outside influences, both physically—in terms of sexual reproduction—and culturally (Saigol 2003). Equating female sexual purity with familial and national honor long justified the practice of keeping women within the four walls of the home, away from potentially corrupting public spaces, and regulating their behavior to comply with moral norms (Khan 2019, 59).⁷

This sets up a fundamental tension between a woman as individual *sui juris* citizen whose equal right to free decision-making is protected by law and her responsibility as symbol of the nation to uphold communal purity and honor—what Rubina Saigol sarcastically calls “his rights, her duties” (2003).⁸ It is this tension that is on display in the clashes between the Aurat March and its detractors. The backlash to the Aurat March has been so vehement precisely because discourses that frame women and their moral behavior as symbolic of the Muslim nation have such a strong normative force in Pakistan.

To understand how these discourses became hegemonic, we need to look back to the 1980s, when dictator Zia-ul-Haq came to power via a military coup against the democratically elected Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Zia used a top-down program of social and political Islamization to lend legitimacy to his power grab; his program particularly targeted women and their rights in the name of Islamizing reforms, sparking protests by newly formed women’s rights groups like the Women’s Action Forum (WAF).⁹ During the 10 years of his regime, and arguably, the multiple tenures of his protégé Nawaz Sharif over the next two decades, Zia managed to cement his

⁷ Shirin Zubair’s argument dovetails with mine when she suggests that by raising the slogan MJMM, Aurat marchers assert their status as full citizens and resist interpellation as repositories of community honour (2022).

⁸ The “Saima love marriage” case study used by Saadia Toor in her work provides an exemplary illustration of this tension. In a close reading of the judges’ written decision, Toor notes that they grudgingly uphold Saima’s right to marry the partner of her choice against her parents’ wishes as protected under the constitution but attribute her filial disobedience to moral corruption by Western influences, antithetical to “Pakistani culture” and a dishonor to the nation. Despite winning the case, Saima and her husband were forced to flee to Norway as they feared death at the hands of Saima’s family (Toor 2007, 270). See also: Jamal 2006.

⁹ Examples of these include the Hudood Ordinances, which dissolved the legal distinction between rape and adultery, allowing women to be charged with adultery if they admitted to being sexually assaulted (Khan 2019); the Law of Evidence, which reduced the value of a woman’s legal testimony to half that of a man’s (Khan 2019) and the Qisas and Diyat laws, which have been shown to incentivize honor killings by allowing a woman’s killer (usually a male family member) to be pardoned by another family member (who is often complicit in her death) (Shah 2016). These do not require in-depth analysis here as they have been explored at length elsewhere.

particular state-sanctioned interpretation of Sunni “Islamic culture” as synonymous with Pakistani culture.¹⁰ Women’s status as biological and symbolic reproducers of that “Islamic culture” was used to justify their moral regulation and control (Toor 2007, 259).

If a woman who conforms to certain moral regulations can be tagged as properly Muslim and therefore authentically Pakistani, by the same logic, a woman who fails to conform to these moral regulations is easily tagged as a Westernized Other and cast out of the national imaginary.¹¹ Since the Zia years, the religious right—particularly Zia’s favored party, the Jamaat-e-Islami (Party of Islam)—has become adept at weaponizing the Pakistan/Islam vs. West binary to demonize anyone who disagrees with their agenda as “un-Islamic” (Toor 2007, 265).¹² Their favorite targets are “willful women” who assert their citizenship rights and refuse to conform to patriarchal controls exerted in the name of the community (Jamal 2006).

Having established the connection between gender, sexuality, and national (Muslim) citizenship, the following discourse analysis will demonstrate that, as Aurat March slogans circulate, influential voices interpret them as an attempt to establish sexual liberation for women, including the freedom to practice homosexuality, which would be (allegedly) beyond the pale of Islamic law and Pakistani culture. In Laclauian terms, we can see this as an attempt to pin down the empty signifier MJMM to a single meaning (sexual license) that, outside of certain elite circles, can only be read as *fahaashi* (vulgarity), which would make the movement virtually unsupportable by a majority of Pakistanis.

¹⁰ In *The State of Islam* (2011), Saadia Toor historicizes the consolidation of Zia’s narrative by tracing its contestation by other narratives on the since-decimated cultural left, reminding us that today’s hegemonic narrative about what Islam and Pakistan are or should be are not, in fact, as natural or ahistoric as their proponents would have us believe. This is valuable intellectual groundwork that opens the door for new counterhegemonic movements, like that of the Aurat March, to be heard today.

¹¹ As Khan and Kirmani astutely point out, much of recent scholarship on women’s activism in Pakistan unintentionally reproduces this binary (2018). There is a body of literature coming from within the feminist movement itself, produced by the original cadre of scholar-activists who themselves helped kick off these developments in the 1980s and 1990s, which largely ignores religious women who do not subscribe to a feminist agenda (for example, see: Shaheed and Mumtaz 1987). On the other hand, there is a separate body of literature produced largely by Pakistani academics based at universities in the West that exhibits renewed interest in piety movements and the experiences of pious women in the wake of increased Islamophobia post-9/11 (for example, see: Jamal 2005). This binary between “secular” and “religious” women feeds into discourses promoted by the Pakistani state that identifies feminist movements as essentially foreign, anti-Pakistan, and anti-Islamic, reifying notions of cultural authenticity located in faith-based approaches—with a corresponding shift in donor funding to faith-based organizations (Khan and Kirmani 2018). In terms of scholarship on the Aurat March specifically, there is a plethora of publications in small Pakistan-based social science and humanities journals that uncritically adopt state narratives classifying the Aurat March as amoral, against Islam, and antithetical to Pakistani culture (Khushbakht and Sultana 2020; Saeed and Batool 2021)—some of these through the language of “gendered neoliberalism” (Riaz et al. 2021), “postcolonial critique” (Naz et al. 2022) and “gendered Islamophobia” (Khushbakht 2022).

¹² In her analysis of discourse surrounding the repeal of the Hudood Ordinances, Moon Charania traces the ways in which precisely this rhetorical move is deployed against female activists by the religious right, which “disciplines feminists, rendering their citizenship fragile (read erotic) and precarious” (2021, 319).

***Mera Jism Meri Marzi* as vulgarity: capture of the Aurat March in Pakistani public discourses**

A common refrain that often reappears in discussions about the Aurat March, particularly on Pakistani morning talk shows, is the assertion that Islam already provides women an exalted position as *ghar ki raani* (queen of the house) and all necessary rights, and that Pakistan was founded in the name of Islam (*Pakistan ka matlab kya hain? La ilahah lilla allah*). This line of argumentation is most often brought by a religious scholar or member of the Jamaat-i-Islami women's wing, who are frequent, almost ubiquitous guests on these panels. This is illustrated by one such panelist on a Samaa TV talk show who asks, "The question is, from whom do they want freedom? From their husband? From parents? From brothers and sisters? From the government? From the state?" (SAMAA TV 2020b, 18:30). The implication is that those women who are continuously demanding rights must want more or different rights than what Islam and, by extension, the state provides. Thus protestors, unhappy with the state of their rights under Islam and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, are construed as simultaneously anti-Islam and anti-Pakistan.

The slogan MJMM in particular is often construed as the embracing of one's own will and whims in defiance of God's will as expressed in a particular state-sanctioned version of shariah law. In their sermons condemning the Aurat March, religious clerics often turn the phrase MJMM on its head, insisting the correct phrase should be *mera jism, Allah ki marzi* (my body God's will). The *mera jism, Allah ki marzi* slogan has been adopted by the Jamat-e-Islami women's wing in their counter protest called the Haya March (modesty march)—setting themselves up as a counterweight to the supposedly impious, immodest women of the Aurat March. In creating these mutually exclusive dichotomies (my will vs. Allah's will, immodest Aurat March vs. Haya March), detractors sexualize the slogan, equating individual autonomy over one's body with sexual licentiousness. The assumption is that freedom over one's body will invariably be used to have sex outside the confines of heterosexual marriage, whereas submitting one's body to the will of God means complying with the holy injunctions to marry, bear children, and fulfill gendered household responsibilities—which are also necessary for the maintenance of a nation-state founded on Islamic principles (as discussed above).

The demand for sexual license is continuously attributed to the Aurat March and read into the slogan MJMM in particular. Some variation of the line, "These women just want to parade naked in the streets" appears repeatedly on social media and talk show critiques of the march. Opponents point to marchers who appear in short sleeves with their heads uncovered and no *dupatta*¹³ as evidence that MJMM's call for bodily autonomy is a call for public nakedness and/or improper dress. Improper attire is considered antithetical to the Islamic injunction to observe *pardah*¹⁴ and feared to inspire unsanctioned lust in men.

¹³ A long scarf commonly worn over the head and/or chest.

¹⁴ Separation between the sexes.

For conservatives, “improper” attire is just a stepping stone to an even more dangerous application of bodily autonomy, sex outside of heterosexual marriage. In a video put out by Islamic Group, a YouTube channel with 3 million subscribers, religious cleric Tariq Masood asserts the importance of marriage as a religiously sanctioned means to fulfill sexual desires without resorting to *zina* (adultery). Beginning his exegesis of Aurat March slogans with MJMM, he takes up another slogan *hamari zarurat shaadi nahin hain, hamari zarurat azaadi hain* (we need freedom not marriage). This clearly means that women who reject marriage are declaring themselves ready to commit adultery and might as well directly open a brothel, he explains. Without the institution of marriage, women will fulfill their sexual desires with men—even multiple men—as if they were goats, which he equates with prostitution (Islamic Group 2019, 5:41).

Furthermore, women who embrace divorce allegedly infect the minds of other women who are happily married, spreading societal discontent. Reiterating that the meaning of Pakistan is there is no god but Allah, he expresses regret that such *bekhudgi* (godlessness) is being spread in a country created in God’s name. “In whose name was this country made?” he asks. “We are people who give our lives for Allah. If Islam cannot be protected in this country then (Allah) will not love this country. Then in this world there is no difference between Israel and Pakistan. Then there is no difference between India and Pakistan” (Islamic Group 2019, 4:30). Here, both calls for bodily autonomy and slogans denouncing marriage are read as a call for an anarchy of sexual relations that disturb the Muslim nation. Excising such *bekhuda* (godless) views on female sexuality from the body politic becomes necessary for the fulfillment of Pakistan’s national mandate to protect Islam.

It is not only religious clerics who take such a stance. After his initial outburst on live television, Urdu drama writer Khalil ul Rehman Qamar makes MJMM a frequent talking point in his appearances on the talk show circuit, in which he denounces the Aurat March as a spreader of *behaiya* (obscenity) and its proponents as *basharam* (shameless) and *beizzat* (dishonorable). Like Mufti Tariq Masood, he connects Aurat March slogans, particularly those related to bodily autonomy and divorce, to the attempt to spread immorality, destroy the Pakistani social setup, and replace its norms with those from “outside.” He says: “Our problem is that we aren’t taking pride in our norms (*Hamara problem ho raha hai ke apni norms ke upar pride nahi le rahe hain*). We are trying to borrow the social setup from outside... Like I’m divorced, I’m happy. It’s such a shameful slogan” (SAMAA TV 2020a, 39:00). His comments do not represent a fringe idea; they circulated widely on television and social media and received vocal support from prominent social commentators and political personalities.

This discourse relies on a binary between Muslim Pakistan, which observes certain gender norms and hierarchies, and “the West,” which does not. Homosexuality in particular is classified by these commentators as a foreign import with no part in Pakistani Muslim history or culture. Homosexual acts are criminalized in Pakistan under the British-era anti-sodomy laws, and Pakistan’s LGBT community mostly lives in hiding. As the Aurat March has gained media attention over the years, so have a small number of rainbow-flag-wearing attendees. Some news outlets engage in a form of “gotcha” journalism in which they ask marchers leading questions about

homosexuality in Pakistan, putting a sensational title on the 2–3-min clip to garner maximum clicks and views. Such opponents frame the slogan MJMM as an endorsement of homosexuality (i.e. the right to “choose” a homosexual lifestyle), which they claim is expressly forbidden under Islam.

Though it is impossible to establish a causal relationship without firm statistics, conversations with interlocutors in the field seem to indicate that the synonymy of MJMM with the Aurat March in combination with the slogan’s capture by vulgarity tropes makes it much more difficult for some women to support the march, especially women who come from more conservative milieus and subscribe to a certain moral code which might be called middle class values.¹⁵ In my conversations with women who were actively opposed to the Aurat March, or who had once participated but since left the movement, MJMM was uniformly cited as a slogan they absolutely could not support. Even those who themselves professed support for the slogan felt that it had been “misused” by others within the movement and without in order to advocate for something the society “is just not ready for”—though what exactly that might be they could not (or would not) explicitly say.

Social activist Hani Baloch is one such person. Baloch hails from a working class family in Lyari, a Karachi neighborhood once famous for convulsions of violence at the hands of various warring gangs, where she operates her own social welfare NGO. Though she is generally supportive of MJMM, it has been so tainted by controversy that explaining the slogan and justifying her decision to attend the march had become unproductive. As a result, she has begun attending a different, unaffiliated women’s march called Mehenatkash instead, which is organized by several leftist collectives on International Women’s Day. Speaking about the Aurat March, she says:

I say their perspective is right, I won’t say it’s wrong. And I think it’s correct, their posters are also correct, absolutely. But the thing is that ... I like Mehenatkash better in that sense. Because there are a lot of people you can’t engage (with Aurat March). You tell them “Aurat March” and they directly shut you down. ... Meaning, they start blame gaming and thinking negatively of you. So if I tell them “Mehenatkash women’s rally” they will have to think a bit, like “what’s the Mehenatkash women’s rally?” So then I will be able to properly explain that this is what it is—it’s like this, it’s like that. Because the way negativitiy has been spread about Aurat March, it’s not easy to explain to people. I can explain Mehenatkash, and I can bring people there.

¹⁵ In personal conversations with women who have been attending the Karachi Aurat March since its founding in 2018, many reported that the presence of “grassroots” women had fallen off steeply. This is partly to be explained by the subsequent growth of Aurat March Hyderabad as many of the (often visibly) rural women from the interior of Sindh who had attended Aurat March Karachi in the first years shifted to the more conveniently located march in Hyderabad. However, others indicated that the controversy surrounding the slogans meant that men (and even some women) from *katchi abadis* stopped other women in their communities from attending, with participation dipping precipitously in 2020 and 2021 because of the controversy around the slogan.

It is important to include voices of former marchers to understand exactly what causes solidarity to break down in situations where certain groups decide to stop marching. Baloch's words make it clear that when a slogan like MJMM loses its emptiness and becomes saturated with a specific kind of highly charged, negative content, it makes marching untenable—not only because it would make Baloch a controversial figure in her own right and potentially jeopardize her standing within her more socially conservative community, but because it forecloses possibilities for changing the hearts and minds of skeptical interlocutors.

Aurat March organizer Soha Tanwir Khan describes a similar situation in which their recruitment pitch at one local university was shouted down by some of the students: As soon as the students heard Khan is affiliated with Aurat March “they were deaf to what I was saying, they could not hear me,” says Khan. While Khan remains an Aurat March organizer, Baloch's solution is to attend a march that has not yet been captured in this way, where emptiness is still intact and productive, providing room for her to explain what the march stands for and why she attends to her community—and to bring potential new grassroots supporters along with her. This is a critical loss for the Aurat March, as it relies on community activists like Baloch to recruit local women through their own social networks on the ground.

Reintroducing emptiness, reviving solidarity: MJMM as safety from violence

Now I will turn my attention to Aurat Marchers' response as they fend off attempts to polarize their slogan by inscribing it with a single, highly contentious meaning. When called upon to disambiguate MJMM in TV interviews and social media posts—to explain what it *really* means—Aurat Marchers embark on their own campaign to fix the meaning of the slogan to a set of demands they feel will resonate with wider publics. However, this disambiguation limits the power of the empty signifier to absorb heterogeneous demands and forces a rejection of the most radical demands from the chain.

In defending the slogan, Aurat March representatives fix its meaning to less controversial demands that can still be tied to bodily autonomy. These include the call to end violence against women in the form of street harassment, catcalling, groping, acid attacks, rape, and forced conversion and marriage; providing better working conditions so that women's bodies are not deteriorating as a result of hard labor for little pay in fields and factories, and not forcing a woman to marry against her will or give birth to more children than her body can bear. These interpretations keep the focus on bodily and sexual rights, which is still largely a taboo topic in Pakistan, but stops short of calling for dismantling the institution of marriage, the right to any sexual partner or to sexual pleasure. The freedoms ascribed to MJMM and other slogans here are mostly framed in the negative—freedom *from* violence and neglect—rather than the freedom *to* exercise sexual and gender role autonomy. And this move is not merely rhetorical; after the initial controversy over MJMM, Aurat March organizers gathered in a 6-hour-long meeting to tackle the question of what MJMM means to them. A small number broached the topic of what MJMM

might mean in a positive sense (the freedom *to*), but this was overshadowed by a cascade of personal stories about sexualized violence and abuse. It quickly became clear that, for the majority of participants in the meeting, MJMM first and foremost means freedom *from*, a reality which is retained in the Aurat March's public-facing response.

In narrowing the scope of their empty signifier to more socially acceptable issues, many defenders of the March often turn the accusation of vulgarity on its head. It is not marchers who are being obscene for bringing these slogans, but detractors who are obscene for interpreting them in a sexual way. Farzana Bari, speaking on behalf of the Islamabad Aurat March in a Samaa TV talkshow panel, put it this way: "This is a very patriarchal mindset that only sees a woman as a body. And when this woman says my body my choice so only one thought comes to their mind..." (SAMAA TV 2020a, 11:30). Here, she makes the patriarchy and its spokespeople responsible for sexualizing the slogan and women themselves, in contrast to marchers, who mean something quite different when they raise this banner. This brings attention back to the hypocrisy of patriarchy, which claims to honor and protect women as wives, mothers, and sisters but in the end only sees them as sex objects and interprets their demands for autonomy in sexual terms.

The visibility of gender and sexual minorities at the Aurat March complicates this attempt to distance MJMM from associations with what the religious right call *fahaashi* (vulgarity). As discussed above, the LGBT rights movement in Pakistan is extremely suppressed as homosexuality is ubiquitously coded as obscene and Western in public discourses. While the Aurat March does not police demands brought by individual marchers, including members of the queer community, organizers rhetorically downplay participation of this extremely controversial group and tread lightly when it comes to display of LGBT symbols. The rainbow flag, in particular, is a point of contention. Marchers who identify with the rainbow flag (and sometimes display it at the march) are largely young, English-speaking, and from strong economic backgrounds. Meanwhile, there are others within the queer community who do not identify with a symbol they see as culturally foreign; they fear the excessive media attention might endanger Pakistan's most visible gender minority—the Khwajasira community—and the march as a whole. With the rainbow flag as a backdrop, the demand for bodily autonomy expressed by MJMM suddenly takes on very radical (and some argue, risky) content.

Still, LGBT participation is rarely explicitly disavowed. One exception is Dr. Mehrub Moiz Awan, a high-profile member of the Khwajasira community, who spoke on behalf of the Aurat March on a TV panel with BOL News (2022, 1:45). When asked about certain controversial posters that would seem to advocate for the rights of men to have sexual relations with men and women with women, Dr. Mehrub drew a clear line between Khwajasiras, who have a long, respected history in Pakistan, and the term LGBT, which she identified as an American import, saying:

Within the modern Pakistan state the term LGBT and homosexuality was used the first time in 2010 when the American Embassy issued a press release. And after that only the Jamaat-e-Islami and this kind of far right fascists have used

the term. Until today I have never seen either the word homosexuality or the word LGBT in the Aurat March's manifesto. Nor have I seen the LGBT term being openly used or LGBT rights being talked about. Only our Khwajasira law has been unanimously approved by the parliament of Pakistan on a broad based consensus with the support of Islamic scholars. In this as well, there is no mention of marriage or sexuality. We are only speaking of basic dignity and human rights.

Later she reiterates that claiming the Aurat March stands for homosexuality or expanded LGBT rights is a straw man argument used to spread hate against the cause. Her words preserve some ambiguity—saying the term has never been “openly” used in Pakistan says nothing about its covert use, for example. Similarly, denying that the word has been used in the Aurat March's manifesto does not preclude its use by individual protestors at the marches. However, taken as a whole, this response fixes the meaning of Aurat March slogans in a distinctly non-sexual way, creating a bifurcation between two links in the Aurat March chain: the LGBT movement (which is marked as a foreign imposition on Pakistani society) vs. the Khwajasira movement, which has the support of society, state, and religious authorities.¹⁶

Conclusion

Early proponents of the Aurat March lauded it as a departure from Pakistani feminist movements of the past because of its willingness to take up the taboo topic of female sexuality. When, in the face of immense public backlash, Aurat March spokeswomen tried to walk back or qualify their support of the most controversial slogans, some Aurat marchers—like Sadia Khatri—were outraged. In her piece called “Should Feminists Claim Aurat March's “Vulgar” Posters? Yes, Absolutely,” Khatri urges feminists to lean in to the “vulgarity” of the slogans instead of trying to explain away their sexual nature. “This is not a time for respectability politics,” she says. “The moment appeasement becomes our default, we will lose space. This is the time to transgress more, in this beautiful moment when everything has exploded, when the scales are in the air and new norms are being set” (2019).

I see it differently. Like the politicians, religious clerics, and “gotcha journalists” of the Urdu news media, Khatri is trying to pin the slogan MJMM and others like it down to a single meaning—a call for female sexual autonomy. What they would call vulgarity, she might call sex positivity. However, the slogan and the movement behind it resists pinning down; whatever the “original” meaning might have been, MJMM and the Aurat March have come to mean many different things for the different women who show up every year.

¹⁶ In 2022, the Khwajasira community itself, and Dr. Mehrub in particular, came into the crosshairs of right wing activists. Their efforts largely targeted the Transgender Protection Act of 2018, which was struck down by the Federal Shariat Court in 2023. Since the beginning of this controversy, Dr. Mehrub has made more explicit statements on her own social media accounts in which she refuses to disown the LGBT community and denounces right wing attempts to weaponize the LGBT term and divide the queer community on the basis of LGBT vs. Khwajasira identification.

An empty signifier like MJMM is necessarily ambiguous. Its meaning is constantly shifting to accommodate different demands coming from different subjects at different times—for me, it means my body, my choice to breathe clean air; for you it means my body, my choice of whom to marry or have sex with, and so on. A certain indeterminacy is essential in maintaining a degree of emptiness. This emptiness, in turn, is productive of solidarity because it keeps all links in the movement's chain intact. When a single slogan becomes the object of intense public scrutiny as in the case of MJMM, it becomes much easier for hostile actors to saturate the slogan with common tropes about dangerous female sexuality that are already firmly embedded in gendered religious nationalist discourses. When religious clerics, politicians, and journalists claim to have uncovered the “true” essence of MJMM—a call for free sex—they affix the signifier to a specific content which forecloses a myriad of other possible meanings. If allowed to dominate, this narrative would almost certainly alienate many of the women who march for healthcare, wages, and religious freedom and are not interested in, or are even hostile to, the idea of sexual liberation. This puts Aurat marchers between a rock and a hard place. When spokeswomen rush to counter these claims by inscribing different, more palatable content into the signifier, they are forced to disavow—either explicitly or in their silences—the most controversial demands in the chain that makes up their movement.

However, I read this rhetoric less as a conceding of ground to the patriarchy, and more as an attempt to reintroduce ambiguity, to resist foreclosure.¹⁷ In a media environment filled with bad actors that try to capture the Aurat March by flooding their empty signifier with content—content that cannot be heard or tolerated in this discursive context—suggesting alternative interpretations of the slogan is a way to open the signifier back up and regain some of the solidaric potential its emptiness holds.

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¹⁷ For full discussion on capture, see Schaflechner and Kramer's introduction to this issue.

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