Networked Struggles: Placards at Pakistan's Aurat March

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Abstract

Aurat March [Women's March] is an annual event organised in various cities across Pakistan to observe International Women's Day. Since its inception in 2018, the March has been condemned by conservative religious and political segments of society for reasons relating to propriety. This commentary explores how placards predominantly form the object of censure in the movement's backlash. By reflecting on discourses on mainstream and social media, I first assess the use of placards in constructing networks of feminist voices. I then assess the (re)production of anti-feminist discourses, sparked by commentary on (select) placards and doctored images to promote dis/misinformation campaigns through the convergence of networked misogyny. Placards at Aurat March have therefore constructed a space for resistance—both by the movement and in retaliation to it—shifting the placard to a site of networked struggles over feminist and women's participation in public spaces.

Keywords Aurat March · Media campaigns · Networked feminism · Networked misogyny · Pakistan · Social movements

Introduction

Aurat March [Women's March] is an annual event organised as part of a socio-political movement for equality and gender justice in Pakistan. Since 2018, it has been organised in various cities on the 8th of March to observe International Women's Day. It is commemorated with a manifesto and charter of demands, mobilising activists in public spaces through networked feminisms.

Over the last three years, Aurat March has been on the receiving end of digital campaigns labelling its efforts to be 'westernised', anti-Islamic and anti-national. The practice of painting feminist efforts in this manner is a familiar patriarchal technique, but is interesting to reflect on its continuity, albeit in different alliterations, as women organise and express themselves in the creation of a (feminist) public.

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By situating Aurat March within Pakistan's broader women's movement, I first reflect on the relationship between (new) media and networked feminisms. While increased connectivity benefits the mobilisation and accessibility of women's activism, it also risks catalysing counter-discourses and anti-feminisms. To draw out the significance of this, I map the struggle between networked feminism and networked misogyny in the digital age by assessing the discourses sparked by and in retaliation to placards carried by participants at Aurat March.

Placards at Aurat March aim to (re)frame cultural codes and challenge the transmission of dominant discourses through imagery and succinct sloganeering. However, as images of placards diffused from in-person offline spaces to online spaces, they formed the primary object of censure in the movement's backlash. Through this article, I use specific examples to assess the selective outrage, dissemination of doctored images and dis/misinformation campaigns triggered by placards, in order to examine how they emerge as a site of networked struggles. In doing so, I conclude that the convergence of networked misogyny attempts to displace networked feminist narratives, thereby delegitimising the movement's credibility and perpetuating idea(l)s of patriarchal propriety.

Women's Movements in Pakistan

The contemporary women's rights movement in Pakistan coalesced during Zia-ul-Haq's military regime in the 1980s. Zia aimed to (re)institute a State based on theocratic ethos, rationalising the introduction of an Islamic system as "an essential pre-requisite for the country" (Collins 1987, 567). His regime passed numerous legislative and cultural reforms to make women's bodies "symbols of the Islamic nation" (Khan and Kirmani 2018, 156). Encapsulated by the slogan '*chadar aur chaar diwari*' [behind a veil and within the four walls of home] (Sharlach 2008), such developments included the banning of women's participation in public events and enacting laws to regulate female sexual behaviour.

The first contemporary women's rights movement in Pakistan was accordingly launched in retaliation to the Islamisation programme, with the Women's Action Forum (WAF) becoming the face of the movement for the next decade. The movement called for a separation between the state and religion (Saigol 2016, 16), addressing the effects of Islamic laws on women (Jahangir and Jilani 1990), and violence against women and girls justified on culture and customs (Brohi 2017). In 1983, women's rights activists marched towards the Lahore High Court where they were met with police violence (Yusuf 2013). This was also the first interaction between the media and Pakistan's women's movement, the former of which referred to the protest as vulgar, anti-Islamic and "imposed by the West" (Ahmed-Ghosh 2008, 108).

The notion that women who engage in struggles for women's rights are 'westernised' and alien to their own societies continues to be promulgated through mainstream and social media in Pakistan (Shaheed 2017). Feminists are portrayed as aggressive and anti-men, leading to many Pakistani women opting to disassociate

themselves from the label.¹ Such representations have created binaries not only between secular/religious feminisms but also good/bad feminisms, with new media playing a large role in dichotomising feminism into the kind it sanctions and the kind it condemns (Lilburn et al. 2000). Media attention to feminism reflects the “cultural schizophrenia” (Douglas 1994, 165) that governs the discursive construction of womanhood. It is then pertinent to question how new media in Pakistan interacts with feminist activists in the digital age. Such mobilisations give rise to networked feminisms, which call for a new form of feminist ‘publics’ organising both virtually and on the streets.

Networked Feminism

To understand networked feminism, I borrow from Lingel’s (2017) concept of ‘socio-technical assemblage’ which combines digital platforms and in-person actions to generate a new mode of activism. Such activism enables individuals to coordinate and partake in mobilised political and social campaigns that converge with media outlets in real time. Networked feminism therefore constitutes “an engagement of feminist subjectivity based in social media networks of distribution” (Rentschler and Thrift 2015, 331). An example of feminist resistance which has taken form through an assemblage of online and physical spaces in Pakistan is a collective called *Girls at Dhabas*. The campaign, focused on women reclaiming public spaces, was launched in 2015 when a member shared a picture of herself having tea at a *dhaba* [roadside café]. The movement grew as more women photographed themselves in public spaces that women did not “conventionally occupy”, sharing their images on social media and encouraging others to do the same (Iqbal 2015, np).

Aurat March is another such example, which uses a combination of online and offline activism through networked feminist collectives to grow the movement (Fig. 1). The March is organised by activists and alliances such as Women Democratic Front (WDF), Women Action Forum (WAF), and *Hum Auratein* [We the Women]. The latter is the group behind the inaugural 2018 Aurat March procession in Karachi, highlighting that they sought to “unite women, transgender and non-binary persons for the cause of gender justice and collective social change, based on principles of inclusion, dignity and respect” (Hasan 2020, np).

Every year, the different city-chapters release a charter of demands through their social media platforms reflecting the theme of that year’s procession, while also listing long-standing demands in areas such as democratic rights, patriarchal violence, economic justice and reforming personal laws for religious and gender minorities.² While digital means are adopted to disseminate and mobilise the cause, the annual

¹ For example, celebrities in Pakistan have distanced themselves from the label, stating that they do not approve of “men-hating bra-burning and growing body hair as acts of feminism”. See The News (2021, np) and Nayeem (2018).

² For details about the manifestos of the respective city-chapters of Aurat March, see Zahid (2021).

Fig. 1 Aurat March/Lahore 2021 *Credit: Noa Avishag Schnall*

Fig. 2 Examples of placards at Aurat March. *Source: Aurat March Lahore/Facebook*

procession is held in public spaces and draws in thousands of participants year after year. Those who are unable to attend the March in person show solidarity to the movement through online engagement with digital platforms, while those on the ground join the procession bearing placards as a tool of activism (Fig. 2).

The use of placards by participants in social movements allows for “visual rhetoric” (Scott 1994). It is a form of communication designed as a symbolic tool of persuasion and debate (Bulmer and Buchanan-Oliver 2006). Placards displaying subversive meanings accordingly aim to disrupt the hold that dominant messaging has on “reality” (St. John 2008, 172). They are a medium through which messages can be composed and spread in a manner that “shields [composers] from political or social sanctions that are likely to be imposed by the authorities and the community” (Al-Sowaidi et al. 2015, 622).

Since its inception, participants at Aurat March have carried placards that challenge dominant norms and gender roles by calling for autonomy, equality, freedom

and justice. They refer to sectarian and ethnic violence, child and sexual abuse, access to public spaces, access to education and healthcare, amongst others. Networked feminism is visible even in the production of placards, as some social media users solicit ideas from the online feminist community, and others offer to make and hold placards for those who are unable to attend the March in person. Placards, therefore, play a role in the making of feminist spaces, by using a combination of powerful slogans, testimonies, artwork, sarcasm, satire and humour as a form of cultural critique. For example, in one instance, a woman held up a placard that said, “*paratha rolls, not gender roles*”,³ and in another, a participant was accompanied by his pet dog wearing a placard that said, “*even I understand what ‘no’ means.*”

Social movements are by nature emotive (Jasper 1998). By countering dominant discourses through symbolic images or representations, placards displayed during processions disrupt the cultural and emotional norms of not only those partaking in the movement, but also those witnessing it. The response provoked by such visual rhetoric is intended to catalyse a change in dominant ideas and perspectives held by the audience. However, the positive emotional energy created for the activists has the risk of invoking negative energy for those witnessing it; an emotional dissonance which can instead produce feelings of disgust or anger towards participants of the movement (Sandlin and Callahan 2009). Behaviours, ideas and even choice of language which do not neatly fit the categories that help define one's view of reality may therefore make the site of that language—in this case, the placard—a site of contestation.

Networked Misogyny

In reflecting on how Aurat March's networked feminism and accompanying placards become a site of contestation, a different kind of networked struggle, termed “networked misogyny” by Banet-Weiser and Miltner (2015, 171), provides insight. Networked misogyny refers to a highly visible form of male supremacy which concertedlly operates to block the efforts of marginalised groups through anti-feminist discourses and hostility towards women in online spaces. Such efforts are underlined by a normative structure of power deeply entrenched within societal culture and institutions. While networked feminism has increased the accessibility, diversity and, visibility of women's movements and activism, the corresponding rise of networked misogyny has initiated a “new era of gender wars” (Banet-Weiser and Miltner 2015, 171).

In thinking of an illustrative example, the narratives surrounding a popular slogan at Aurat March comes to mind. *Mera Jism Meri Marzi*, a direct Urdu translation of My Body My Choice, is a feminist slogan used internationally for bodily autonomy and freedom of choice. The slogan's adaptation for Aurat March was a call to end violence against women and girls in all its numerous forms, including

³ Paratha rolls are a common South Asian snack, made with kababs and flatbread.

sexual assault, female genital mutilation, and bonded labour.⁴ However, the slogan has been called vulgar, inappropriate, against societal and religious norms (Tunio 2020), and the product of a ‘western campaign’ (Tribune 2020). In 2019, an Islamic cleric responded to the slogan during his sermon which went viral on social media. Interpreting the slogan as “an open call for fornication and adultery”, he said, “My body my choice, your body your choice—then men’s body men’s choice; they can climb onto anyone they want” (Samaa 2019, np). Further, in a talk show broadcast on national television in 2020, a (male) screenwriter responded to a (female) activist’s explanation of what the slogan stands for by saying, “What is in your body? Who the hell are you? Go look at your body and face—no one even wants to spit on it” (Habib 2020, np). Backlash on social media led one participant attending the following Aurat March to hold a placard that altered the slogan to say, “*Mera jism, teri marzi. Ab khosh?*” [My body, your choice. Happy now?].

In response to Aurat March, networked misogyny functions as a “disciplinary rhetoric” (Cole 2015, 356), carving new means to silence women’s participation in the public sphere through trolling, threats and shaming. Resistance to the marginalised voices of women is diffused through online and offline spaces as a means of pushback. Because social network sites are unique in their (scal)ability, they provide an “interconnected network structure where discourses and counterdiscourses can cascade exponentially across both spheres in rapid time” (Chan 2018, 565). Posts relating to Aurat March were similarly countered in online spaces, aiming to repack-age the subversive meanings of activist’s messages. These efforts were predominantly directed at and relating to placards pictured at the March, thereby making them the primary focus of the movement’s backlash.

Networked Struggles

I map the struggle between networked feminism and networked misogyny by reflecting on specific examples of placards at Aurat March. In each example, I provide a brief account of how the placard was used as a tool of agency for women, positioned in parallel to the anti-feminist reaction to it. In doing so, I first comment on the selective outrage towards placards, followed by reflections on doctored images of placards circulating digital media, and finally the broader dis/misinformation campaigns sparked by this discourse.

Selective Outrage

The initial outrage towards Aurat March was instigated by images of select placards, some of which are reproduced below. Critics seemed to ignore the majority of placards entirely, overlooking slogans and images that referred to early and child

⁴ Variations of the slogan have also been used for other demands of the movement, such as forced conversions. An example of this is ‘*mera mazhab meri marzi*’ [my religion, my choice].

Fig. 3 Placard 'lo, baith gayi sahi se'. Source: Aurat March Karachi/Facebook - faces pixelated by author

marriages, gender wage gap, reproductive health and domestic violence. Instead, discourses on social media focused on a handful of images deemed 'inappropriate' in Pakistani society to generate backlash.

In 2019, an Aurat March participant held a placard with a drawing of a woman, which said '*lo, baith gayi sahi se*' [here, I am sitting properly] (Fig. 3). The placard aimed to shed light on the policing of women's bodies and a woman's agency to sit as she feels comfortable without being harassed or victim-blamed for assault because of how she carried herself. On social media, the picture of the placard was criticised for depicting sexual imagery and referred to as "womanspreading" (Ebrahim 2019). The college student that made the placard received messages saying, "We can't believe you did this, you're from such a modest family" (Ebrahim 2019, np).

Another participant carried a placard that said '*dick pics apne paas rakho*' [keep the 'dick pics' to yourself], referring to the high number of unsolicited explicit images sent to Pakistani women on social media without their consent (Fig. 4). However, it was widely circulated and criticised on social media for using language that was 'derogatory and disrespectful', and for only highlighting issues of 'privileged women'. The associated outrage also led to a columnist speaking at a show on broadcast media angrily demanding a "suo moto notice", stating that this placard "usurped" his "fundamental human right" (@nayadaurpk_urdu 2019).

The previous year, a participant held a poster that said, '*khud khana garam karlo*' [heat up your own food] (Fig. 5). It was a call to shift the division of domestic labour,

Fig. 4 Placard ‘dick pics apnay paas rakho’. *Source:* Aurat March Karachi/Facebook - faces pixelated by author

Fig. 5 Placard ‘khud khana garam karo’. *Source:* Aurat March Karachi/Facebook - faces pixelated by author

as well as a shift in what is culturally expected of women in Pakistan.⁵ As clarified by the placard-holder, it is “a demand encompassing many realms beyond just men

⁵ It is pertinent to note that in 2017, a woman in Punjab was killed by her husband for ‘serving him cold food’ (Tribune 2017).

Fig. 6 Doctored placards. *Source:* Manal Khan, participant at Aurat March 2019/Twitter

heating up their own food. It is a call to change the very nature of male–female relationship in our society” (Asna 2018, np).

When the picture of the placard was circulated across social media, the March was criticised, predominantly by men, for encouraging women to leave their domestic duties. In retaliation, a campaign called ‘Mard March’ (Men’s March) was started by a social media company, FHM Pakistan. This campaign showed pictures of men holding placards telling women ‘what to do’ (The News 2019). Examples include ‘*pehle khana paka tu lo, phir mein garam bhi kar longa*’ [first you cook the food, then I will warm it up]; ‘*credit card apna banwalo*’ [get your own credit card] and ‘*meri nazrein meri marzi*’ [my eyes, my choice].

The issue was not that all these placards were ‘sexual’ or ‘vulgar’. Indeed, telling someone to heat up their own food is not sexual, but relates to ideals of gender normativity; an issue that was seen as being inappropriately taken to the streets. In a similar fashion, artwork and placards displayed on the streets of Lahore in 2020 were torn down within 24 hours (Dawn 2020a), and on the streets of Islamabad a mural of two women was vandalised with the words ‘*fahashi*’ [vulgar] and ‘*na man-zoor*’ [rejected] graffitied over it (Dawn 2020b).

Doctored Images

The outrage sparked by select placards also led to a series of doctored images of placards inundating the movement’s online hashtag. These images either photo-shopped the original slogans on placards, or added slogans to pictures of participants holding blank (inverted) placards. In one case, a placard which said ‘*izzat*

nahi, insaan hoon mein’ [I’m not your honour, I am a human] was photoshopped to replace the word human with ‘*randi*’ [prostitute]. The original placard was in reference to the high number of women and girls that are killed by family members due to ‘provocative’ intents or behaviours that ‘dishonour’ their families (Hussain 2006). In another case, Journalist Manal Khan was pictured with her placard which said ‘*mein awarah, mein badchalan*’ [I’m free, I’m bold]. On social media, a doctored image of the placard was disseminated which said ‘*mein ma, mein behen, mein biwi, aur mein beti, mujhe faarigh auntion se bacha lo*’ [I’m a mother, a daughter, a wife and a sister; rescue me from these (liberal feminist) aunts] (Fig. 6).⁶

Further, a picture of two men holding blank placards⁷ was doctored to say, ‘legalise alcohol and same-sex marriage’ and was distributed on social media, accompanied by captions stating that such placards are ‘evidence’ of the March being a front for ‘un-Islamic propaganda’. A television anchor also posted a photograph of himself attending the March with his family, where his wife was holding an inverted placard. In the doctored versions, his wife’s blank placard had been photoshopped with writing that said, “it is not immodest to be naked” (@_mansoor_ali 2020).

Campaigns of Dis/misinformation

Aurat March has witnessed a rise in campaigns through networked misogyny before, during and after the on-ground rally year after year. The diffusion of selective and doctored placards led to a series of both disinformed and misinformed claims about the March. These claims led to the Islamabad March being attacked with stones, bricks and sticks for “provoking religious sentiments” (Geo News 2020), as well as petitions being filed against the Lahore March for having an “agenda to spread anarchy” (Yasif 2020, np). The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting has publicly stated that the placards seen at the Aurat March were “against the values of society” (Dawn, 2021a, np), and one provincial assembly passed a resolution condemning the March as “shameful” (Hayat 2019, np). However, the intensity of dis/misinformation campaigns has steadily increased through coordinated trends on social media, levelling detrimental accusations of blasphemy against organisers of the March.

In 2021, Aurat March (Lahore Chapter) shed light on abuse and violence faced by women and girls by sharing personal experiences of survivors through testimonies. These testimonies were written down and displayed during the March, pictures of which were shared across the movement’s official social media platforms. One of the testimonies said: ‘*mein nau saal ki thi, woh pachas saal ka tha. Mujhe chup karwa diya gya aur us ki awaaz aaj bhi masjid mein goonjti hai*’ [I was 9 years old, he was 50 years old. I was made to stay silent, and his voice still echoes in the mosque] (Fig. 7). This testimony was from a woman who was sexually abused as a child, at

⁶ I have translated the term ‘faarigh’ in the context in which it has been used here. The literal translation is to be unoccupied or have too much time on your hands.

⁷ The pictured participants stated that they held blank placards to convey that men should stay quiet and let women speak about their rights for themselves (Qureshi and Husain 2020).

Fig. 7 Testimony of survivor. *Source:* Aurat March Lahore/Twitter

the hands of an adult *qari sahib* [Quran or faith teacher].⁸ As per Aurat March's own statement, the testimony was shared to 'shed light on the serious matter of child sexual abuse in Pakistan and the impunity granted to abusers' and to support survivors by "giving voice to their stories" (@auratmarch 2021).

Soon after a picture of this testimony (amongst many others) was uploaded to social media, #AuratMarchLhr_295C became the top trending Twitter hashtag in Pakistan, referring to Section 295C of the Pakistan Penal Code which concerns blasphemy laws.⁹ Content accompanying the hashtag included a picture of this testimony with comments referring to Prophet Muhammad's marriage with Aisha.¹⁰ Because (some) Islamic schools of thought cite *hadith* that the Prophet consummated his marriage to Aisha when she was nine years old (Al-Bukhari 2021)¹¹ the link drawn between the ages in the survivor testimony led to accusations of blasphemy levelled against Aurat March for referring to the Prophet in a derogatory manner (@aurangzebfaruqi 2021). A second hashtag, #HangAuratMarchers, was launched soon after, accompanied by comments inciting vigilantism and issuing death threats to organisers of the March. This instance is an example of deliberate misconstruing of placards to imply that those supporting the movement were engaged in anti-national and anti-religious rhetoric (The Nation 2021).

⁸ Child abuse at religious schools in Pakistan has been termed 'endemic'. See VOA News (2020).

⁹ Pakistan Penal Code (Act XLV 1860) Sect. 295-C, 'The use of derogatory remarks, etc., in respect of the Holy Prophet' is punishable by death or imprisonment for life.

¹⁰ Aisha was the third wife of the Prophet Muhammad.

¹¹ It is pertinent to note that some Islamic scholars contest the age of Aisha at the time of (consummation of) marriage.

It is also pertinent to note that campaigns of dis/misinformation using visual rhetoric have recently started to extend beyond just the placard. In 2021, a video of slogans being chanted during the March surfaced on social media with doctored subtitles, to further implicate the organisers in blasphemy charges (Dawn 2021b). As a result of these campaigns, Aurat March faced a serious form of online and offline backlash, which included men accumulating outside a police station demanding that the organisers of the March be arrested immediately (@rabail26 2021). The banned terrorist group Tehrik-e-Taliban also issued threats to organisers for “spreading obscenity and vulgarity” (Naya 2021, np), and the federal government ordered a probe into the “objectionable activities which took place on the occasion of Aurat March as reported on social media” (Anis 2021, np).

Conclusion: Media(ted) Feminisms

In assessing the backlash towards and censure of Pakistan’s Aurat March, this article reflects on how placards emerge as a site of networked struggles. While Aurat March uses networked feminism to mobilise and disseminate its activism in the creation of a feminist public, it continues to face discursive violence sparked by a convergence of networked misogyny. Through online commentary, doctored images and dis/misinformation campaigns, placards are used as the site through which to delegitimise and reduce the credibility of the movement, taking away from its claims for gender-based justice, protection from violence and abuse, equality and inclusion.

To an extent, these narratives have been successful in reframing Aurat March’s manifesto. Media articles have referred to the movement as ‘secular and liberal terrorism’, with placards “going beyond westernisation to vulgarisation and also dehumanisation” (Baig et al. 2020, 417). Even within the field of academia, participants of Aurat March have been dismissed as “not worried about women’s issues, but truly concerned about what illogical and absurd things men can do and women can’t” (Khushbakht and Sultana 2020, 62).

The terms used to challenge (feminist) public spaces, such as ‘indecent’ and ‘inappropriate’, are loaded terms linked to ideas of propriety. Participants of the Aurat March using placards as a tool of cultural critique were instead seen as breaching proprietary societal politics. The demands of the procession were overlooked, the inclusivity of hundreds of men and women from different social classes, age, ethnic backgrounds, religious affiliations, and gender and sexual identities went unnoticed. Even the presence of veiled women holding placards that said ‘*mera libaas, meri marzi*’ [my dress, my choice] were ignored.

While the March has continued to pull in participants, with crowds getting bigger each year, despite the number of restrictions, conditionalities and permissions that have been instituted in its wake, it will take many more placards to challenge the internalised notions of patriarchal propriety, and seize the public spaces it is trying to occupy. The struggle between networked feminism and the countering networked misogyny will play a pivotal role in shaping Aurat March’s trajectory towards becoming the new face of the women’s movement in Pakistan.

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