

Perception of Youth Regarding Aurat March in Pakistan: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

The current study explores the perception of youth regarding Aurat March in Pakistan, emphasizing its importance in understanding young people's perspectives on gender issues. The semi-structured interview guide was used to conduct the interviews with young people. The interviews were then transcribed and analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis. The findings indicate that young people hold positive and negative views of the Aurat March. On the positive side, many perceive it as a crucial protest against gender inequality and injustice, offering a platform for individuals to advocate for women's rights. However, there are also concerns among youth that the Aurat March promotes vulgarity and advocates for LGBTQ+ rights, which some perceive as a western agenda. Additionally, some participants feel the march primarily represents the issues of elite women rather than addressing broader societal concerns. This study highlights the importance of involving young, educated individuals in the Aurat March to raise awareness of gender issues, challenge societal norms, and create a more inclusive dialogue around women's rights in Pakistan. Understanding these diverse perceptions is essential to increase meaningful conversations and progress toward gender equality in the country.

Keywords: Aurat March, Perception of Youth, Engaging Youth, Women and NGO.

Introduction

The Aurat March, a socio-political protest in Pakistan, has evolved into a powerful platform for women from diverse backgrounds to voice their concerns and demand gender equality. What began as a single event in 2018 has become a significant social movement attracting participants from various socioeconomic, religious, ethnic, and geographical backgrounds (Iqbal, 2020).

The Aurat March stands out because it unites people under a shared goal of reclaiming public spaces and advocating for women's rights despite the nationwide lack of ideological uniformity among participants. It symbolizes resistance against gender-based discrimination and violence, encouraging unity across popular movements (Iqbal, 2020). The Aurat March was started in 2018 in Karachi as part of international women's day celebrations. In 2018 around 1,000 people participated in it. However, with time, it expanded in different cities, and in 2021, the number of participants increased to around 15,000 across multiple cities. In 2022, around 20,000 participants

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joined Aurat March in various cities of Pakistan, i.e., Islamabad, Karachi, Lahore, and Peshawar. As the Aurat March grows, it remains a beacon of hope for women in Pakistan, encouraging them to challenge oppressive structures and cultural beliefs. However, it has faced criticism, especially from conservative sectors, for being led by privileged women and focusing on issues perceived as less relevant, such as LGBTQ+ rights and personal autonomy, rather than pressing concerns like healthcare, education, and the dowry system. Critics argue that the march destabilizes traditional Islamic family structures by promoting radical feminist ideals and introducing western values (Saeed et al., 2021). Despite these criticisms, the march has persisted, with slogans and posters like "Mera jism meri marzi" ("My body, my choice") and "Apna moza khud dhoondo" ("Find your sock on your own") becoming emblematic of women's everyday struggles (Zia, 2020). While criticized for being inappropriate, these slogans highlight women's lived experiences and aim to spark conversations about oppression and gender-based issues (Batool et al., 2022).

The Aurat March is crucial in promoting equal rights and opportunities for women in Pakistan. It advocates for legal reforms, including repealing discriminatory laws and campaigns for better healthcare, education, and employment access. Many women's movements in Pakistan, including the Aurat March, emphasize the importance of education in empowering women and securing their participation in politics and decision-making. The movement raises awareness about the gender pay gap, job discrimination, and other forms of inequality while advocating for women's participation in all sectors of society (Shaheed et al., 2010).

Despite its positive impact, the Aurat March has faced backlash on social media and criticism for being against Pakistani societal norms. In a patriarchal society where men control women's mobility, choices, and sexuality, the Aurat March challenges these deeply rooted norms by advocating for gender equality and social justice. As a critical and evolving segment of society, youth are vital in shaping the future of women's rights movements in Pakistan. Their perspectives on the Aurat March are crucial to understanding the movement's broader impact on society (Batool et al., 2022).

Though critics argue that the Aurat March diverts attention from more significant issues like healthcare and education, supporters view it as an essential platform for reclaiming public space and advancing social equity. The movement has sparked meaningful discussions about feminism, socio-religious integration, and women's rights in Pakistan (Shaheed et al., 2010).

The Aurat March in Pakistan has gathered widespread attention, particularly among the youth, as an annual socio-political protest advocating for women's rights (Mukhtar et al., 2022). Reflecting modern feminist ideals, it attracts participants from diverse gender identities and backgrounds, promoting discussions around empowerment and feminism (Sarwar, 2021).

While the march has sparked critical discourse, particularly regarding the role of men in feminist causes (Khan, 2022), it has faced both support and opposition. Critics, especially from conservative and right-wing groups, argue that the march promotes western feminist ideals that conflict with Pakistan's Islamic and cultural values, accusing it of focusing on marginal issues and disregarding pressing concerns like healthcare, education, and family structure (Saeed et al., 2021; Batool et al., 2020).

Despite these critiques, the Aurat March continues to highlight gender-based violence, discrimination, and the need for legal reforms, such as the Workplace Harassment Act and the Child Marriage Restraint Act, advocating for rights in both public and private spheres (Rahim et al., 2023). Although the march has faced backlash, including physical attacks and online harassment, it remains a powerful platform for voicing women's concerns (Alam, 2021). While some see it as divisive and anti-Islamic, others view it as a crucial step toward achieving gender

equality and justice in Pakistan (Zia, 2020). However, research on youth perceptions of the Aurat March is limited, despite their potential to shape the future of women's movements in the country (Khushbakht et al., 2020).

Given Pakistan's ranking as the second worst country in the World Economic Forum's 2022 Global Gender Gap Index, the Aurat March raises critical awareness about gender disparities. This research aims to explore the perceptions of Pakistani youth regarding the Aurat March, a topic that has yet to be thoroughly studied. Understanding these perspectives will shed light on the broader societal impact of the movement.

Methodology

In this research, qualitative research design was employed to gain an understanding of the views that youths hold towards Aurat March. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the students of Quaid-e-Azam University, a public sector co-educational university in Islamabad, Pakistan. Ten students (five male and five female students) from different socioeconomic backgrounds were interviewed for the present research to get insights regarding the difference of opinion based on the various socioeconomic backgrounds. An interview guideline was used as the research tool, enabling participants to express their views regarding Aurat March. These interviews were conducted in Urdu, and after seeking written informed consent, interviews were recorded on an audio-recorder to be transcribed later. The collected data's thematic analysis was done, patterns and themes were counted, and the results were aggregated into research objectives through iterative coding and synthesis.

Research Objectives

1. To explore the perceptions of youth in Pakistan regarding Aurat March.
2. To understand the factors influencing youth's attitudes and opinions towards Aurat March.

Results and Discussion

This study analyzed the Aurat March movement, its slogans, and its objectives, using a social constructionist framework to explore the views and debates surrounding the Aurat March in Pakistan. It highlights how the movement is perceived, why it sparks controversy, and the potential consequences it may have. Social constructionism suggests that gender systems and other cultural norms are established and reinforced through language and behavior.

The primary objective of this research was to identify the factors shaping youth perceptions of the Aurat March. Specifically, the study analyzed (i) the contribution of organizations like the Aurat March to women's rights advocacy, (ii) the controversies and debates surrounding the movement, (iii) the effect of its slogans, posters, and language on youth perspectives.

Perception and Purpose of the Aurat March

The Aurat March, an annual event in Pakistan, is a movement that promotes women's rights and gender equality. It is seen positively by advocates, who regard it as critical to women's empowerment and gender awareness.

Participant 03 stated that "the Aurat march is good for Pakistan but they hijack the Aurat march because of blunt feminism, and they change the perspective of the march."

Women are aware of their rights. They see as thought media Aurat March spread vulgarity. The Aurat march is perceived as giving women rights, but typical men are against the Aurat march because they assume the march is only for time to pass. Aurat March believes in equality. Aurat

March is against women's suppression and oppression. Aurat March is getting rights for women. Aurat march spread vulgarity in Pakistan. Aurat march is important for Pakistan because of women's development.

The participants understood the Aurat March as the March for women's rights and gender equality, but they considered the Aurat March as "blunt feminism". Thus, the Aurat march did not campaign for what they supported. They kept saying that there are two sides to the story: one is to help the women, and the other side is that Aurat March encourages vulgarity and is against the Islamic Shari'ah. Islamic feminism, based on the beliefs and precepts of the Islamic faith, addresses such principal tenets of feminism as agency, autonomy, and the concept of empowering women, with a focus on women's status in religious practices and in the family context, as well as seeking changes in the society and law. On the other hand, Western feminism concerns itself with some critical aspects of women's self-governance, reproductive freedom, and choice in all life areas, some of which include wage disparities, women's quota in workforce and political positions, and gender violence (Grech, 2014).

Some perceptions about the Aurat March by youth are to support equal rights, and opportunities mean, for some, the way Aurat March was used for women was not rights and opportunities. March's objective is considered to combat inequality in women and demand equal rights; however, its reference to the equality of gays and other people of the same sex is ambiguous.

The Stated Purpose and Objectives of the Aurat March

The Aurat March aims to advocate for equal rights and address inequalities faced by women and transgender individuals, emphasizing the value of all genders. But the socio-cultural Participant 09 stated that:

Aurat march spread vulgarity. They think they provide rights to all that is not possible in this country. If all the areas of women were added in March. They have different agendas that why they also confused and include many genders like LGBTQ. Aurat march promotes LGBTQ. If the Aurat march is only for women then we will support it if they exclude the LGBTQ.

Participants' perceptions of the Aurat March are shaped by a range of social constructs influenced by cultural, religious, and socioeconomic factors. Cultural and religious norms impact how individuals view the inclusion of LGBTQ+ rights in the march, with some perceiving it as conflicting with traditional values and criticizing it for promoting 'vulgarity.' Gender norms and equality perspectives affect engagement, with supporters of gender equality seeing the march as crucial for challenging entrenched norms, while others view its broader agenda as disruptive. Socioeconomic backgrounds also influence interpretations, as those from privileged backgrounds may support the march's comprehensive approach, whereas those from less privileged backgrounds might focus on immediate issues or see it as irrelevant. Additionally, political ideologies shape views, with progressive supporters viewing the march as essential for social change, while conservatives may criticize it for its Western-influenced agenda and challenge to established norms. These diverse constructs highlight the complex interplay between personal beliefs and broader social movements.

Role of the Aurat March in Securing Women's Rights

Participant 02 stated "the Aurat march plays an important role for women who fight for their rights like elite-class women. Aurat march's agenda changed because they did not promote their real agenda."

Participant 06 stated “the Aurat March also increased aggression in people, which is why they faced criticism.”

Participant 05 stated that:

Aurat march faced criticism because in the 19s when women decently started their women's rights everyone appreciated but Aurat spread vulgarity. The Aurat March is often seen as ineffective in advancing women's rights. Women in many parts of Pakistan continue to struggle for their rights, and the march has not led to any legislative changes.

This split of opinion highlights the Aurat March's complex and controversial nature, showing both its potential and its difficulties in the fight for women's rights.

Participants' social constructs significantly influence their views on the Aurat March's effectiveness in securing women's rights. While some recognize the march's role in raising awareness and mobilizing women for their rights, others criticize it for lacking tangible legislative outcomes. Additionally, there are divergent opinions on the march's impact, with some arguing that it primarily benefits upper-class women and neglects the needs of rural or less educated women who lack resources to advocate for their rights. This critique highlights concerns about the march's class sensitivity and its accessibility to marginalized groups, revealing how varying social constructs shape perceptions of its effectiveness and inclusivity.

Opinions on Whether Women's Rights Are Already Granted by Religion

In the Aurat march, they protest for those rights which are given by religion. The belief that women's rights are already guaranteed by religion, particularly Islam, is a prominent stance in discussions surrounding the Aurat March.

Participant 07 stated “In Islam, they give rights to women but society does not because our society is patriarchal. If society does not provide the rights and you suffer then you start protesting against your society.”

Participant 09 stated “it is not right to protest against a religion that already provides you the rights. Our woman's problems are she goes in all places to change their lives and get rights, but she did not examine the problem sincerely.”

This particular point of view draws attention to the distinction between religious doctrines and social norms, suggesting that the Aurat March's main goal should be to hold society accountable for failing to protect the privileges that religion has long enjoyed.

Religion and women's rights are two topics closely associated with each other, very much a part of the Aurat March. Another criticism points to the fact that religion of Islam, for instance, should already support women's rights, thus women's march is unnecessary and could also be anti-Islam. Some people embraced the opposition of the march by stating that societal behaviors go in contrast with religious beliefs and this march is to fix the difference. This fight depicts a greater struggle for the definition of faith and the implementation of religious and cultural teachings in contemporary society, hence arguing that religiosity and culture are socially constructed entities.

Controversies and Debates Surrounding the Aurat March

The Aurat March has been the focus of many disagreements and arguments, including responsibilities that it provisions of the “Western agenda.”

Participant 10 stated “the Aurat march encourages the Western agenda because they promote LGBTQ.”

They encourage those rights that are forbidden in Pakistan or religion. The Aurat march is a Western agenda that is good because someone takes steps to spread equality. The Aurat March adopted things from Pakistan not based on the Western agenda. If they talk about the West there are many rights for women other than in Pakistan because their mentalities and Pakistani people's mentality are different, Pakistani people are closed-minded and do not deeply analyze the problem. Participant 01 stated that:

In the West, if one woman started a movement for rights, they assumed that this fight was for all women in the world. But Pakistani people blamed Aurat as a Western agenda because of the ego. Due to march their ego heart.

The debate over the Aurat March, which promotes a "Western agenda," exemplifies the complexities of advocating for women's rights in a society where cultural, religious, and societal values frequently clash. Some see the march as a necessary step towards gender equality, while others see it as an imposition of foreign values.

The Aurat March has generated a lot of controversies and discussions, especially regarding the allegations that it is a 'Western' march. Some of the critics, for instance, pronounced that the march promotes such values as LGBTQ rights, which they consider as un-Islamic and un-Pakistani. They consider it as bringing in foreign concepts that are inapposite to the local culture and norms.

However, some participants, countered that these criticisms are rooted in the inability to accept gender imbalances, claiming that the refusal is due to ego and a lack of desire to consider progressive concepts. The debate raises the question of how to promote women's rights while taking into account the cultural and social realities of Pakistan, where any attempts at empowering women are viewed through the prism of Western intervention.

Concerns about the Aurat March being non-compliant with Islamic teachings

The Aurat March has raised issues about its compliance with Islamic teachings, with conflicting perspectives on whether the movement follows or rejects these values.

Participant 06 stated

In every country, Islam has a different face and ideology. Because in different countries women have different issues but they fight and get their rights. The Aurat march is not against Islam. If society gives the rights to women then women did not start the movement.

This viewpoint contends that the Aurat March is not intrinsically anti-Islamic, but rather a response to society's failings to guarantee women their rights, which Islam already supports.

Participant 09 stated "the Aurat March is anti-Islamic because it involves women protesting for their rights on public roads. Create a boundary that does not conflict with Islam if women choose to lead the campaign for their rights."

This reflects a significant division in Pakistani society regarding the march's compatibility with Islamic principles. This view suggests that while advocating for women's rights is crucial, it should align with Islamic norms. Some participants believe that the Aurat March effectively addresses the community's failure to uphold women's rights as prescribed by Islam, viewing it as a necessary reaction to societal neglect. Conversely, others see the march as incompatible with Islamic teachings because it involves women publicly protesting, which they argue is contrary to Islamic values. These differing opinions highlight a deep rift in how the Aurat March is perceived in relation to Islamic law, underscoring the debate over whether the movement's methods are appropriate within the framework of religious norms.

Diversity of Agendas and Opinions within the Aurat March

The Aurat March has a variety of aims and perspectives among its participants, reflecting the complicated landscape of women's rights campaigning in Pakistan.

Participant 08 stated that:

The Aurat march promotes its agenda which is to provide equal rights to all women in Pakistan that face inequalities. In Aurat march everyone brings their agenda. Students participate in March during their internship. Where they see every NGO bring their agenda like they have written agenda in their hands. Every group that has the same agenda stands in groups with the same agenda. Depending on the difficulties they face, some women hold opposing views. In most cases, the students did not participate on their own, but when they worked for an organization or non-governmental organization, they did because of their work.

The Aurat March's diversity of goals and perspectives exemplify its inclusive nature and the wide range of issues that Pakistani women hope to address collectively. This diversity deepens the discussion on women's rights and raises the voices of people calling for change in various sectors of Pakistani society.

The Aurat March is not a singular entity but rather a tapestry of diverse voices and perspectives on women's rights in Pakistan. As noted by Participant, its core aim is to advocate for equal rights for all women facing discrimination. However, the march also reflects the agendas of various groups and individuals, including NGOs, student organizations, and others, each bringing their own goals and objectives to the forefront (Ali et al., 2020).

This diversity is visible in the different banners and messages displayed during the march, highlighting a broad range of concerns. While this inclusivity enriches the movement by addressing multiple issues, it also introduces challenges in uniting such a wide coalition behind a unified cause. For example, some participants, such as students involved through internships or NGO affiliations, may contribute based on external motivations rather than personal convictions, adding complexity to the movement (Akhtar et al., 2021). Thus, the Aurat March embodies a wide array of voices, reflecting both its strengths in representing varied issues and the difficulties in consolidating a collective agenda.

Use of Slogans, Posters, and Language in the Aurat March

The Aurat March's slogans and posters serve numerous goals and generate a wide range of reactions in Pakistani society.

Participant 01 stated that:

The poster of the Aurat march is a purpose to highlight the issues that women faced. The poster Mera Jism Mari Marzi. This is the right of women what they wear or not. We did not restrict women in their choices or opinions. The other slogan is Apna Khana Khud Gram Kro. This is the right slogan. Women do house chores all day if men cook the food that's okay for it.

During house chores women are tired, and men give the space to women for their rest.

Participant 09 stated that:

The slogan used in the Aurat march is not right due to the vulgar language used in it. The slogan is also against Islam. They manipulate Islamic ideology. Women have the right to do all the things like house chores. Women have also a responsibility to do men's work like cooking food for men. The purpose of slogans and posters is to promote vulgarity in Pakistan. Every individual makes their poster that

negatively on Aurat march. Some people promote the negative slogans. There is no promotion of good posters and slogans.

This argument reflects the Aurat March's problematic theme, with supporters seeing chants as powerful and supportive of women's rights, while critics claim that some slogans are culturally insensitive or divisive. The march's language and images highlight broader societal disputes about feminism, cultural standards, and religious interpretations in Pakistan.

The phrases used in the Aurat March have elicited diverse reactions from masculine sections of Pakistani society.

Participant 05 stated that:

The slogan used in the March disrespects the male because of all the slogans against the men. Women demand those rights that are against Pakistani society because in our society they make women respect attached to the men. Men are more important than women. Men are dominant. Educated men understand the reason behind it but typical men do not understand and analyze the reason.

Participant 10 stated “the slogans are not related to men's respect. Women only demand their rights. Through slogans and posters, they represent the problems, and issues that they faced.”

“Some people said that I think so.”

“Some people I do not know.”

The divergent perspectives on the Aurat March underscore a broader cultural debate regarding its messaging and impact on gender relations in Pakistan. Some view the slogans and statements of the march as a direct challenge to entrenched male dominance and traditional norms, believing them essential for addressing deep-seated gender inequalities (Khan, 2022). In contrast, others perceive these expressions as provocative and misaligned with cultural and religious values, arguing that they exacerbate societal tensions rather than fostering constructive dialogue (Khan, 2022).

For instance, slogans like ‘Mera Jism Meri Marzi’ (My Body, My Choice) and ‘Apna Khana Khud Garam Kro’ (Cook Your Own Food) are seen by supporters as crucial assertions of women’s autonomy and equality. These phrases aim to spotlight issues of bodily autonomy and domestic equality, raising awareness about women's rights. Conversely, critics argue that such slogans are culturally insensitive and clash with Islamic principles, viewing them as potentially humiliating and destabilizing traditional gender hierarchies. This clash of views highlights the ongoing tension between advocating for women’s rights and maintaining cultural and religious norms, reflecting the complex interplay between cultural values, gender roles, and feminist activism in Pakistan (Batool & Malik 2021).

Representation and Inclusivity of the Aurat March

The Aurat March has been scrutinized for its inclusion and representation of women from various socioeconomic backgrounds.

Participant 01 stated that:

The Aurat march is only for elite-class women because their agenda is promoted in the march. Those who lived in rural areas or faced real problems did not participate in the march. They also did not know about the movements and NGOs that work for women's rights. Lower-class women only suffered because they did not fight for their rights because of our system. Women did not have proper education and knowledge which decreased the problems they faced.

Participant 10 stated that:

The Aurat march provided a platform but in big cities, not in rural areas. In big cities, women have different backgrounds and problems. They promote their agenda. The main problem is education that is not provided by our system to all genders where it is necessary for awareness.

The participant emphasized that education plays a crucial role in enabling women to actively participate in movements like the Aurat March, suggesting that greater access to education could empower women across various socioeconomic backgrounds to advocate for their rights more effectively. However, the Aurat March is predominantly a city-centric event and often overlooks women in rural or economically disadvantaged areas. To ensure broader participation, it is essential to develop innovative strategies that reach and engage all women in Pakistan, thereby fostering more inclusive advocacy for gender equality and rights.

Role of NGOs and Civil Society in the Aurat March

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play an important part in organizing and supporting the Aurat March, as well as pushing for gender equality legislation in Pakistan.

Some participants stated that:

Yes, most of the NGOs are involved in the Aurat march. The role of NGOs is portrayed as negative in our society through the internet and media. They play a good role in the country for women's rights. NGOs will work on it like need to learn diplomacy.

Participant 10 stated “yes, NGOs play a role in legislation but they work in groups like some NGOs work on different problems if they work collectively then we will see a change.” Participant 05 stated “no, NGOs did not work in legislation because they are non-government organizations.” However, there are some opposing viewpoints. While non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are actively involved in organizing the Aurat March and lobbying for women's rights in Pakistan, opinions of their success in influencing legislative changes vary. Their role is critical in mobilizing public opinion, promoting awareness, and advocating for measures that promote gender equality and women's empowerment in the country.

Youth Engagement and Awareness Raising

Engaging young people in the Aurat March is regarded as critical for creating awareness and promoting development in Pakistan. Participants all agree on the significance of involving youngsters in conversations about gender equality and women's rights. They argue that the government has not created appropriate outlets for youth to publicly discuss these problems. Instead, other participants point out that addressing such matters on social media may result in censorship or limits.

All participants stated “yes, engaging youth is very important in our country for development. Our government did not provide a proper platform for youth to discuss these issues. If anyone talks about these issues on social media, they block their account.”

The participants advocate for increased government involvement in these discussions during the Aurat March. They emphasize that the government should actively interact with people to grasp their true difficulties and challenges. They argue that such conversations can inform and shape government policies and programs aimed at improving women's lives and advancing gender equality throughout Pakistan.

Involving youth in the Aurat March will not only raise awareness about gender issues but it will also provide a platform for constructive dialogue among youth, civil society, and the government. This engagement is essential for social change and addressing fundamental disparities affecting women in Pakistani society.

Conclusion

The present study concludes that the Aurat March has emerged as one of Pakistan's most significant movements for social justice and women's rights. Using a social constructionist perspective, the study highlights the diverse perceptions of Pakistani youth towards the march. While some view it as an important tool for advocating women's issues and challenging gender norms, others criticize it as vulgar and non-Islamic, reflecting the ongoing cultural and ideological conflict in Pakistani society. The research reveals a divide among youth, with responses reflecting a broader clash between liberal feminism and patriarchal traditions. Criticism of the march's slogans and images further underscores tensions between global and local feminist ideals. Additionally, the movement has been accused of elitism, neglecting the concerns of poorer, rural, and less-educated women.

Although the Aurat March has raised awareness on issues like gender-based violence and workplace discrimination, its long-term impact on legislative and societal change remains uncertain. The heavy reliance on NGOs for organization and support, while beneficial, may limit grassroots activism. The study recommends greater engagement with local communities and movements to address these societal issues more effectively.

Further the study recommends, that Aurat March must consider Pakistan's socioeconomic and cultural complexities to continue advocating for gender equality. By acknowledging cultural and religious sensitivities while strengthening the voices of the marginalized, the movement can be more inclusive. Additionally, involving the youth in future gender equality discourse is crucial for the march's continued evolution into a broader social movement.

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