**[Embracing feminism](https://www.dawn.com/news/1823040/embracing-feminism)**

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FEMINISM often sparks debate. It is hailed by some as a beacon of equality and derided by others as a divisive ideology. It is almost taboo in Pakistan, especially since the Aurat March that began in 2018 raised critical issues of gender equality and faced a fierce backlash. While it was accused of emphasising minor issues and controversial slogans, the division went beyond placards. Rather than uniting people under a common cause, the marches inadvertently widened the gap between many Pakistanis and the feminist movement, highlighting a crucial misunderstanding of what feminism entails.

This piece explores a deeper, research-informed understanding of feminism, that aims to foster a more inclusive dialogue to move towards a more equitable society.

**What is feminism?:** Feminism is a sociopolitical movement that champions equality, tackling systemic discrimination and oppression by challenging power imbalances. It advocates for a society where everyone, irrespective of identity, is free from discrimination, by dismantling underlying oppressive social structures (such as patriarchy) through empowering marginalised voices and advocating for equitable access to resources.

Feminism has evolved in various waves: from legal rights and suffrage of first-wave feminism, to broader societal issues of second-wave feminism, to postcolonial thought in third-wave feminism, and now emphasising ‘intersectionality’ that recognises that oppression can intersect across gender, race, class, and more. Feminism is not limited to a single gender or to women alone. Though historically focused on women’s rights due to greater discrimination against women, contemporary feminism aims to eradicate systemic inequalities that harm everyone, promoting solidarity among all who aim for universal equity and justice.

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**Feminism: a Western ideal?** Often misperceived as a Western, liberal, or anti-religious movement, feminism has evolved into a diverse, global phenomenon that includes Islamic feminism, advocating for gender equity within Islamic teachings and challenging patriarchal norms. In Pakistan, since 1947, the feminist movement has navigated between secular/ liberal and Islamic perspectives but shares the goal of advocating for women’s rights and empowerment. While feminist groups like the Women’s Action Forum have advocated for women’s equal rights and access to the public sphere, contemporary Islamic feminists leverage Islamic principles for advocating reforms in marriage, divorce, and inheritance rights. Both unite under the common cause of women’s emancipation and rights.

**Why choose feminism?** Feminism means opposing pervasive injustices and violence in daily life, and recognising that while such injustices manifest across socio-spatial demographics, they are deeply influenced by gender. In Pakistan, about 32 per cent of women have experienced gender-based violence and over 90pc face domestic violence in their lifetimes. Pakistan ranks 142nd out of 146 on the Global Gender Gap Index. Of the 23 million children not attending school, the majority are girls — 58pc in Sindh and 78pc in Balochistan. Additionally, while only 50pc of women own a mobile phone compared to 81pc of men, women are also 49pc less likely to use mobile internet, highlighting significant gaps in access to education, communication, and digital resources.

Women constitute only about 25pc of the formal workforce (compared to 83pc of men) and hold merely 4.5pc of senior positions. Additionally, they occupy only 20pc of the national parliament seats, underscoring the struggle to meet gender quotas. Even when women participate in the formal economy, they fail to secure equal wages and benefits for the same amount of work. A UNDP report notes that the country’s gender wage gap results in a cumulative wage loss of Rs500 billion, across women’s lifetime earnings. Women undertake four times more unpaid and undervalued care work than men, highlighting the critical need for feminism to address and dismantle the systemic barriers women face.

My research reveals that in Pakistan, access to energy and services is significantly gendered. Ru­­ral women often bear compounded burdens of agricultural and household responsibilities without clean energy access, thus causing their health, well-being and climate resilience to be adversely af­­fe­c­ted. Urban low-income women face similar disparities, balancing income work with household chores, and experiencing limited mobility and socioeconomic opportunities.

Such disparities extend bey­ond income levels, and are rooted in women’s intersectional identities — including class, religion, edu­cation, occupation, and location — and household roles as caregivers, household managers, mothers- and daughters-in-law, income-generators, housemaids, etc, highlighting the need to address such gendered disparities across all social strata. Femi­nist approaches also reveal how many such disparities result from cultural conservatism, entrenched patriarchy, gender blindness and stereotypes, rather than religion. By exposing and challenging these oppressive systems, feminism seeks to dismantle rigid gender roles, improving the visibility and understanding of gender disparities.

**Feminism for all:** Feminism has grown into a diverse movement of plurality beyond any single ideology. While the Aurat March faces the challenge of uniting diverse feminist thoughts, it has succeeded in spotlighting critical issues like gender violence and socioeconomic inequalities — issues of justice with sound basis in Islamic jurisprudence, like women’s right to assets, land ownership, safety, education and basic services. Undermining these rights perpetuates discrimination, contradicting the principles of both religion and humanity. Focusing on these issues, the Aurat March offers a potent platform for all women and feminists to advocate for these fundamental rights. Success lies in celebrating diversity and uniting to achieve the common good.

At its core, being a feminist means opposing oppression and supporting equitable policies for all individuals to pursue their aspirations free from discrimination and violence. Therefore, if you are an advocate of equal pay for equal work, if you champion every individual’s right to education and development, if you stand against sexual harassment, and if you believe in equal access to safe and inclusive spaces free from intimidation, then you too are a feminist.

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