**[A perspective on Aurat March](https://nation.com.pk/12-Mar-2020/a-perspective-on-aurat-march" \t "_new)**

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Marking the 3rd annual Aurat March in Pakistan, there were held a number of rallies in the major cities like Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad, Sukkur and Quetta on Sunday. Such rallies were obviously meant to observe International Women’s Day (IWD) 2020. Despite criticism, opposition, and threats from the county’s conservative quarters, the organizers and participants of the rallies forcefully and fearlessly communicated their agenda and viewpoint, inter alia, on multiple issues currently affecting Pakistani women. The judiciary and local administration had allowed holding such rallies while asking participants to adhere to “decency and moral values”. Fearing a backlash, the organizers also advised participants to remain cautious about their actions and slogans during the march. This year, the organizers of the march also formally presented a ‘charter of demand’ containing some progressive and pertinent points ranging from ensuring economic and social justice to women to end exploitation, harassment and violence against them.

Though there echoed a variety of slogans and demands during the march, the libertarian feminist slogan “Mera Jism, Meri Marzi” (my body, my choice) continued to rule the roost. This slogan, in fact, had already become quite touchy and controversial owing to its multiple interpretations and some indecent connotations. Contrary to its conservative interpretation, feminists have explained it as slogan simply referring to women’s autonomy over their bodies in terms of reproductive health and consent of marriage. Interestingly, while there were raised a lot of issues concerning domestic political and security matters in addition to women’s rights in these rallies, we hardly observed any single placard or poster displaying the official theme for IWD 2020 ie #EachForEqual. Individuals all over the world, holding up both hands to resemble an equal’s sign, keenly projected such theme to support gender party on this year’s International Women Day. Our feminists and marchers, however, considered it appropriate focusing on some traditional left-wing and controversial issues in the country.

This year’s Aurat March was marred by a hot debate between the pro-march progressives and anti-march conservatives over the propriety and efficacy of such mass movements in the country. This debate was further highlighted following a TV talk show airing a live scuffle between a renowned playwright Khalil-ur-Rehman Qamar and well-known rights activist Marvi Sirmed. The playwright’s conduct in the show was really deplorable. A person, who claims to be a writer and intellectual, is certainly not supposed to resort to such an abusive language against a woman as he did during the talk show. On the other hand, however, the attitude of Marvi Sirmed was not appreciable either. She is best known for her signature verbal attacks against the participants which can instantly turn a peaceful talk show into a battlefield. In this show, in addition to participants, the show host and TV channel also failed to properly play their respective roles to avert or avoid this untoward incident. Just like the county’s many other issues, unfortunately, Aurat March rally has also somehow become a contentious issue in Pakistan.

In Pakistan, the IWD was observed largely by mere holding Aurat March rallies in major cities to promote women’s rights. Unluckily, these rallies have, unlike other countries, given rise to a divisive and controversial campaign in the name of promoting feminism. Feminists essentially presuppose the state, the government, and the menfolk to be an integral part of the substructure of the patriarchal society. And, therefore, they hate them all for this single reason. Moreover, there is also a perception that they are just promoting the rights of some privileged and fortunate women rather than standing for gender parity and women empowerment which have been hallmarks of the feminism. As a matter of fact, their ideology and activities are closely resembling the libertarian or radical feminism- a perspective within the feminism favoring a radical reordering of the society to eliminate male supremacy from it socially, politically and economically.

The libertarian or radical feminism is associated with the so-called second wave of feminism starting from the early 1960s. It essentially view the society as fundamentally a “patriarchy” in which men dominate and oppress women. These feminists, therefore, try to dismantle the foundation of such patriarchal society to liberate women from the eternal male dominance. Simultaneously, they also call for giving women complete autonomy regarding her sexual choices, marriage and reproduction to the exclusion of the societal or state regulations. Nonetheless, libertarian feminism, having fascinated and motivated women all over the world for decades, is no more considered to be an effective and relevant tool to promote feminism in the contemporary world.

In reality, it is not exactly the patriarchy but the sociocultural milieu which largely lies at the root of major problems currently faced by Pakistani women. For instance, domestic violence is mostly associated with the typical Dickensian setting. The literacy and income level of the people matter the most. Moreover, the prevailing extended family system makes things even worse for the women. The number of children is usually disproportional to the material resources of the family. The general state of lawlessness, injustice and violence in the society are the other contributing factors. Naturally, the women and children are more vulnerable to become the miserable victims of the psychological ‘displacement of aggression’ in the home. Likewise, both girls and boys are equally denied their right to consent to marriage since their parents traditionally decide whom they should marry.

In the early 2010s, the so-called fourth wave of feminism just resulted in reshaping the entire perspective on feminism around the world. It is primarily focused on the women’s empowerment. It puts a strong emphasis on women’s active and due participation in the political structures and economic decision-making. Such feminists are largely relying on the social or digital media, in addition to the print and broadcast media, to achieve goals of feminism. Seemingly, the impact and efficacy of this year’s Aurat March would hardly be impressive if we analyze it in terms of fourth-wave feminism. There was a smear campaign against it on social media. The mainstream media did also not properly cover it owing regulatory censorship. The government reluctantly approved it. There was no participation of any government minister or senior public official in these rallies. The judiciary and the local administration also imposed restrictions.

It is certainly a constitutional right of individuals to freely express and propagate their progressive left-wing views publicly. It is, however, advisable that they should focused on the major issues of the mainstream feminism while celebrating the IWD in the country. The frontrunners of the Aurat march and such other movements should stand for the empowerment of the unprivileged or less-privileged women in Pakistan. For this purpose, they should positively utilize synergies gained from the state, the government and the media. They should make menfolk join hands with them rather than unnecessarily provoking them, and labeling them as misogynists after being obsessed with the notions like patriarchy etc.

I also suggest that the government should officially observe the IWB in the country every year just like many countries in the world. On this day, there should be announced some concrete measures for women empowerment and development. And meritorious service awards should be presented to women from all walks of life that perform extraordinarily. The government should mobilize all relevant state institutions to ensure effective enforcement of all laws enacted to protect and empower women in the country. There should be an enabling environment for women where they could easily survive and thrive. More power to Pakistani women!