**Is Aurat March truly inclusive?**

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Aurat March seems to be gaining momentum. Over the years, participation has increased. Mobilisation, both online and offline, has risen. Cities like Multan, Sukkur and Hyderabad have started to have their own marches as well. However, as the organisers celebrate five years of Aurat March, we are compelled to look at the movement critically, evaluate its success and address the pitfalls. All other objections and backlash aside, the glaring criticism is that this movement is elitist. It is non-inclusive. It caters to the upper-middle-class, high-caste urban women and leaves out the rest. Despite the efforts of Aurat March organisers to dispel such claims, the objective lack of inclusivity makes for an uneasy conversation that needs to be had. Is Aurat March as inclusive as it claims to be? To answer this question, one must peruse the criticism. There is some weight in the claim that Aurat March tends to leave out some sections of society. One such section is women from rural areas. The rural population in Pakistan stands at 62 percent, and most women in these areas are completely unaware of the goals, manifestos and demands of Aurat March. Another factor that is overlooked by the feminist leaders is the presence of caste-based discrimination in rural areas that impact low-caste women disproportionately. Next, class divide alienates the working-class women from their upper- and middle-class counterparts. Lastly, religious and sexual minorities are the most marginalised and oppressed groups in the society. What is important to note when discussing these particular women is that their struggles with inequality are different, more complex and more nuanced than the blanket policy of “all women and men are equal” that feminists generally argue for.
The first argument in defence of the march is that the conversation, the struggle and the protest has to start somewhere. And it starts with people who have the resources, in terms of both freedom and mobility, to go out and protest. The “freedom” stems from their privilege. It is often the educated middle-class folks who lie in that sliver of the oppressed population who are able to speak up against the oppression. One look at the history of rights and independence movements around the world provides a recurring phenomenon. Seeds of Pakistan’s independence movement were sown not in the soil of the farmers of Punjab or in the brick kilns of Bengali workers, but in the drawing rooms, offices and classrooms of the educated middle-class intellectuals. Similarly, leaders of the Women’s Suffrage Movement such as Susan B. Anthony and Alice Paul were all educated women from affluent backgrounds who amassed women to fight for their right to vote in the US. There are many such examples, but the central idea remains the same. It isn’t that the marginalised classes are ignored, it is simply that they are unable to be a part of the protests due to the socio-economic and patriarchal barriers that prevent them from participating. Women who are threatened by violence to not step outside the house for work, cannot and will not shout slogans, hold placards and march in the streets, regardless of how much they want to. The leaders of the Aurat March are not only cognisant of this reality but are actively fighting to eradicate these barriers that bar women to be free in both private and public spaces.
5 years on, when we look at the future of feminism in Pakistan, we look at the long-term goals of the Aurat March. From physical attacks on marches to deep-rooted patriarchy in society, there are a plethora of challenges this movement faces. As steadfast and defiant as it has been in the past few years, it has to reevaluate itself in terms of inclusivity. Pakistani feminism must be intersectional i.e. it strives for gender equality across class, caste, religion, sect and ethnicity. The rights of low-caste, working class rural women are just as important as the rights of high-caste, middle class urban women. While aurat march recognises and strives for this inclusivity, it has to do more. The acclaimed feminist scholar and activist, Rubina Saigol suggested that Aurat March must be a movement instead of an annual event. Though it has tried to evolve into one, it faces a long and arduous journey ahead. The leaders must first address the organisational and internal fault lines in order to successfully transform the march into a movement that has a united front instead of just “chapters” in various cities. More importantly, the urban-rural divide has to be understood, addressed and abated. Creating awareness in less affluent neighbourhoods of Lahore and Karachi is one thing, but mobilising deep within the rural structure of all provinces requires intricate planning, organising and funding. Similarly, Aurat March needs to address security concerns of the marginalised groups and work towards providing a safe space to the groups who are more susceptible to backlash and violent attacks upon their participation in the march. The leaders of the march need to dive into the complexities of the issue of inclusivity as fearlessly as they deal with other challenges.
Irrespective of its success, failures and backlash, Aurat March is here to stay. Each year the event sends more ripples through the country than before. As it grows larger, louder and harder to ignore, the march and its leaders owe it to themselves and their supporters a platform where any woman can feel that her voice is heard, that she is safe and her participation matters. The theme for this year’s Aurat March is asal insaf or ‘real justice’, and we hope that the march does justice to its promise of empowering Pakistani women, all of them.