**[March for justice](https://www.dawn.com/news/1676256/march-for-justice)**

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BILL Gates’s first-ever [visit](https://www.dawn.com/news/1675569) to Pakistan delivered a strong message — but probably not the one he anticipated. More than his discussions with Imran Khan, the attendance at a lunch the prime minister hosted for Gates has made an impression, for all the wrong reasons: there was not a single woman in attendance.

This is appalling on two levels. Gates was in Pakistan to learn from our country’s polio eradication efforts. Women have been the backbone of the polio vaccination programme, building community trust, and comprising 62 per cent of the front-line workforce that vaccinates children. Why wasn’t a female health worker extended an invitation?

And even though Gates’s visit was polio-focused, he doesn’t traipse around the world without his tech hat. In this context too, women rank high among Pakistan’s tech stars, leading the field for digital rights and inclusion, online education and countering online harassment. Their strong voices resonate more in a country where women are digitally disadvantaged (only 13pc of Pakistani women have internet access, and there is a 33pc gender gap in mobile phone usage). What message does it send to exclude these voices when Gates visits? That they are invisible, irrelevant, inconvenient.

It didn’t help that Gates’s visit occurred soon after Minister for Religious Affairs Noorul Haq Qadri [called](https://www.dawn.com/news/1675664) for the UN-designated International Women’s Day on March 8 to be replaced with International Hijab Day. This was a not-so-veiled attack against the Aurat March, which has gained traction in recent years as the fight for women’s rights feels more urgent. The minister pitted the Aurat marches as anti-Islam and offensive.

Anti-women positioning is front and centre in Pakistan.

Talk about missing the point. That women’s rights are automatically equated with religious subversion is deeply problematic, and part of a cynical ploy to divert focus from women’s legitimate demands. For the record, Qadri sahib, the Aurat marches have never sought to counter hijab wearing (which is hardly under threat in Pakistan, and globally celebrated on Feb 1). Indeed, women’s rights champions seek to impose nothing on anyone, and simply ask that due rights and process be acknowledged.

**Editorial:** [*Noorul Haq Qadri's assertion is a dangerous one in a country already dangerous for women*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1675889/hostility-to-aurat-march)

For too long, proposals like Qadri’s have been dismissed, primarily by the middle class, as fringe, and not worth a real fuss. But that’s why the Gates lunch matters. It shows that an anti-women positioning is front and centre in Pakistan. Those left in doubt should recall that last week also saw the [acquittal](https://www.dawn.com/news/1675079) by an appeals court of Mohammed Wasim, who murdered his sister Qandeel Baloch for ‘dishonouring’ her family.

Within a span of a few days, the political and religious leadership and judicial system reminded Pakistani women that our basic demands for dignity, safety and freedom are unacceptable. It is no surprise we languish among the 12 worst-performing countries in the world on the Women Peace and Security Index (2020). Our women are worse educated (with a 22pc lower literacy rate than men), poorly paid (with 18pc of labour income), and inadequately represented (with 20pc parliamentary representation).

This widespread and deep-rooted misogyny is increasingly at odds with reality. Women’s economic participation is critical for Pakistan’s survival, and prosperity. Whether they like it or not, they are out of their homes: in fast-growing cities, soaring inflation means dual-income households are a necessity; in climate change-struck agricultural heartlands, women have to search farther afield for water, and worker longer hours and erratic seasons in the fields. A pandemic-hit world puts greater demands on female health workers; the shift to a services economy req­uires more female workers in retail. All these women need their rights upheld.

It feels sickening to have to tout women’s criticality to the economy as a way to defend their basic rights and calls for justice. But we are at that point, clutching at straws. That’s why this year’s Aurat March in Karachi is focused on women’s labour rights, under the slogan of ‘Humari Mehnat, Humara Haq’, while the one in Lahore (timely, given the Qandeel verdict) is about reimagining justice, with the slogan of ‘Asal Insaaf’. These are not subversive themes; they are demands for what is due, in danger of becoming cries for help.

And the fact that these demands are being squashed and maligned by the likes of Qadri, and implicitly ignored by our state and judicial system, rankles more during the first International Women’s Day after the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. Our state’s celebration of that ‘victory’ and continued support of the Taliban regime — even as it denies women everything, from primary schooling to healthcare and representation — sends a chilling message about what value our higher-ups ascribe to half the population. And it’s a message that makes me want to march. What about you?

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*Published in Dawn, February 21st, 2022*