**[Polarisation is the beginning](https://nation.com.pk/12-Mar-2020/polarisation-is-the-beginning%22%20%5Ct%20%22_new)**

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The Aurat March 2020 has been dividing people in Pakistan: the cat’s out of the bag. And its a great thing that in the context of a hegemony of an intensely well-oiled patriarchal machine that dominates general discourses and practices, a new space for dissent is emerging, which is shaking the status-quo in creative manners. This is not to say that the current struggle for the emancipation of marginalised genders in Pakistan is unprecedented. The struggle has been fought on the fringes, historically, but there is a novelty about the current variant. While social media spaces have a tendency to make us more tribal, they allow for the possibility of a democratic space for resistance, simultaneously. The difference, I sense, is in the rising level of traction and popularity that the debate is receiving on a mass-level. That, in some ways, is unprecedented. Everybody has a take on the Aurat March, for good, or for worse.

Unfortunately, continuing on the trend from last year, a few placards seem to have almost taken the feminist narrative hostage. Debates on TV and social media outlets have been so cynically and strategically constructed that those fighting for the emancipation of marginalised genders from a progressive view point are forced into a defensive position. Most media outlets began the debate by criticising the slogan “Mera Jism, Meri Marzi” (my body, my autonomy) as a Western import, suggesting that it is corrupting our Easternness by advocating for sexual freedom. These are typical right-wing tactics of reducing a complex slogan with multi-pronged effects to a self-servicing footnote. The slogan condemns “marital rape, female genital mutilation, forced marriages, forced pregnancies, sexual assault, acid attacks, human trafficking, bonded labour, physical abuse, body shaming, sexual harassment, and child abuse” amongst other dimensions. Anyone in their right minds, and with half a heart, can relate to the gravity of these above-mentioned issues areas in “developing” Pakistan. The statistics do not lie. As referred to in an earlier column I wrote last year on this issue, in contemporary Pakistan, 90% of all women have faced sexual violence at some point in their lives. Around 80% domestic households in Pakistan have incidences of violence, where males are obviously the perpetrators. Pakistan ranked at 148 out of 149 countries in the ‘Global Gender Gap Index 2018’ report on gender parity, released by the World Economic Forum. 74% of all Pakistani women have less than 6 years of education. Pakistani women constitute 52% of the population, but make up only 24% of the labor force. Female share in wage employment is only 15% as they are engaged mostly as ‘family’ workers (54%), working without pay in the informal sector.

Detractors however seem to rejoice in painting the whole spectrum of the feminist resistance with one broad brush - that it is a Western agenda/conspiracy. If the language and vitriol that Khalil ur Rehman employed against Marvi Sirmed reflects those seemingly Eastern ethos, then there is a huge problem with your understanding of Easternness. And the production crew’s understanding of Easternness as well, as they let him abuse her, while his microphone had a considerably higher volume/gain setting so it overpowered Marvi’s voice. Was the anchorperson displaying a fidelity to her Easternness when she chose to not stop Khalil ur Rehman even once, tacitly siding with him in the onslaught? This shameful display of uncouthness and sheer vulgarity does not have anything to do with the higher ethical ideals of tolerance, compassion and respect for women that have been a hallmark of the Eastern way of life, at least the way I imagine it. The way Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, Sachal Sarmast, Bulleh Shah or Shah Hussain imagined it. If you still want to resort to the east-west dichotomy, there are certain things that Pakistani society needs to learn from the West, which includes a glaring amount of relative autonomy that has been granted to the women, as a consequence of the long and protracted feminist struggles in the last three centuries. If your conception of Easternness imagines women to be completely submissive to the will of the patriarch and rids them of their agency to Be, justifies honour killings, Wani and karo-kari, or refuses them the right to seek higher education, then you need to be released from your medieval imprisonment. The times they are a-changin’ and with the influx of the positive side of awareness that has been brought on by the juggernaut of globalisation and a widespread belief in universal human rights and civil and political liberties for all, you stand on the wrong side of history. Your misplaced paternalism and ill-founded misogyny have no reasonable space in the 21st century, and the sooner you accept that, the better it is for you, and definitely those around you.

While organisers and participants in the Aurat March revel in the hope that originates in collective gatherings of the sort, there is a need to maintain a sense of reality and not be swayed too much by the sheer numbers that showed up. The struggle needs to be articulated strategically in the political, cultural, academic as well as personal spheres, and this sort of change does not take place overnight. There is however a likelihood that the feminist struggle will manage to cut across boundaries of class, caste and creed as activists learn to unite on some essential shared ideals of equality and fraternity. The vibrant scenes in Sukkur, and elsewhere in Sindh, have silenced the cynics who reduce the struggle to be a plaything of some upper class individuals.

On both, the societal and state level, there needs to be a serious consideration to educate the marginalised genders and make them useful contributors to the economy. As the President of Pakistan recently advised female medical professionals not to be sacrificed at the altar of marriage after obtaining their degrees like many before them, there seems to be a growing realisation of the issue amongst some elements in our government. However, whilst the two main popular political parties, the PTI and PML(N) only gave restrained and rhetorical support to the marchers, it was only the Bilawal Bhutto Zardari led PPP which gave complete support to the Aurat Marches throughout the country - a bold and appreciable step. Vive la résistance!