



CONTEMPORARY MODES OF RESISTANCE, IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND THE RISE OF EMERGING SOCIAL MOVEMENT: “A CASE STUDY OF AURAT MARCH IN PAKISTAN”

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Abstract

This study examines the Aurat March in Pakistan as a contemporary feminist movement through the lens of New Social Movement (NSM) theory, intersectional feminism, and postcolonial feminist perspectives. Emerging in 2018 as a decentralized, multi-issue mobilization, the Aurat March departs from elite-led, rights-based advocacy by embracing symbolic protest, digital activism, and collective identity formation across diverse constituencies, including women, transgender persons, domestic workers, and students. Drawing on qualitative methods interviews, focus groups, participant observation, and discourse analysis of media and digital content this research explores how the March’s slogans, visuals, and performances challenge entrenched patriarchal, religious-nationalist, and neoliberal norms, while provoking organized backlash from conservative actors such as the Haya March. Findings reveal that symbolic resistance and cultural subversion are central to the movement’s identity politics, with digital networks amplifying both solidarity and moral panic. The study contributes to NSM theory by contextualizing it within a Muslim-majority, postcolonial setting, highlighting how backlash itself reinforces movement boundaries and solidarity. It also underscores the role of Pakistan’s digitally connected urban middle class in shaping protest aesthetics and narratives, offering theoretical, empirical, and policy insights into feminist resistance, digital safety, and inclusive gender justice frameworks in South Asia.

Keywords: Feminist Movement, Aurat March, Mode of Resistance, New Social Movement

Introduction

In the early 21st century, feminist movements have taken on progressively varied procedures, habitually influenced by regional, cultural, and political backgrounds (Castledine, 2004; Walby, 2002). Whereas global feminist narratives have traditionally highlighted rights-based strategies and formal institutional engagement, recent years have experienced the growth of popular, intersectional, and expressive arrangements of feminist struggle (Mohanty et al., 1991; Fraser, 2022). These new modes of resistance are often personified in New Social Movements (NSMs), which redirect attention from traditional class-based struggles to distinctiveness, culture, and representation (Melucci, 1980; Buechler, 2007). In the context of these changing paradigms, the Aurat March in Pakistan arises as a serious case study, condensing the changing aspects of figurative protest, identity formation, and intersectional involvement in a profoundly male-dominated and conservative society (Kirmani, 2020; Zia, 2018).

The Aurat March first planned in 2018 to honor International Women’s Day has become one of the most prominent and provocative feminist movements in Pakistan. In contrast to outdated advocacy movements of socio-political elites led by powerful women or NGOs, the Aurat March represents a delegated, multi-issue mobilization, led by youth, working women, trans activists, and artists. It demonstrates a unique combination of resistance rooted in performative activism, digital



communication, and collective identity formation (Butler, 1993; Hewitt, 2011), making it an ideal case for examining the rise of new social movements in South Asia.

This proposal investigates the Aurat March as a contemporary expression of feminist resistance through the lens of new social movement theory. By concentrating on its symbolic protest forms, diversity of participants, historical framing, and the controversies it generates—especially from traditionalist counter-movements like the Haya March—this study seeks to understand how resistance shaped by gender-based dynamics is being redefined in Pakistan’s socio-political context (Zia, 2018; Obiora, 1997).

Over the last century, feminist movements around the world have experienced substantial transformation, evolving from formal suffrage movements and legal right-based activism to decentralized, identity-based, and symbolic modes of resistance (Walby, 2002; Weldon, 2004). In the Global South, notably in South Asia, these transformations have been shaped by colonial legacies, entrenched religious and cultural traditions, military influence, neoliberal globalization, and authoritarian political structures (Mohanty, 1984; Scholz, 2014). In the wider framework, the rise of NSMs has marked a precarious transition in how marginalized groups assert their identities, mobilize resistance, and engage with state and societal structures (Bartholomew & Mayer, 1992; Della Porta et al., 2006). These movements focus on symbolic action, cultural contention, and identity assertion over class-based economic reorganization (Buechler, 2007; Şimşek, 2004). Feminist activism, especially in Pakistan, has gradually connected to these emerging forms of resistance (Kirmani, 2020; Zia, 2018). The history of feminism in Pakistan has been largely developed by reactions to pressing threats against women’s rights and control over their bodies (Zia, 2018). Between 1977 and 1988, during General Zia-ul-Haq’s military regime, the implementation of regressive laws like the Hudood Ordinances institutionalized gender-based discrimination (Kirmani, 2020). In response, organizations such as the Women’s Action Forum (WAF) emerged as prominent forces of feminist resistance (Zia, 2018). The early movements of feminism were primarily shaped by legal advocacy, policy engagement, and mobilization spearheaded by elites. Nevertheless, they faced criticism for their urban focus and lack of engagement with the lived experiences of working-class and rural women (Kirmani, 2020). Over the past few decades, in response to such criticism, feminist expression has shifted towards greater intersectionality and local relevance, driven by digitally connected, globally aware, and grassroots-oriented young activists (Hewitt, 2011; Fraser, 2022).

The Aurat March, initiated in 2018 to mark International Women’s Day in Pakistan, serves as a striking representation of this transformation (Kirmani, 2020; Zia, 2018). It challenges earlier feminist modalities in both procedure and substance. Instead of politicizing through conservative NGOs or engaging in parliamentary advocacy to articulate gendered grievances, the Aurat March uses street protest, art, satire, performance, and digital activism (Butler, 1993; Hewitt, 2011). The March’s embrace of diverse narratives—women, trans persons, domestic workers, students, and minority communities—emphasizes its decentralized and intersectional nature (Mohanty et al., 1991). Its slogans, such as “Mera jism meri marzi” (My body, my choice), “Lo beth gayi sahi se” (Yes, I’m sitting properly), and “Ghar ka kaam sab ka kaam” (Housework is everyone’s work), serve as symbolic acts challenging deeply rooted patriarchal norms (Butler, 1993; Weldon, 2004). Although these statements, often dismissed as “vulgar” or “un-Islamic” by opponents, are intensely figurative



interventions in the public domain, they attempt to redefine how gender, autonomy, and morality are conceptualized in Pakistan (Zia, 2018).

The Aurat March provoked an immediate and layered reaction from conservative parts of society—including religious organizations, political actors, and media figures—which mobilized a counter-narrative grounded in moral panic and religious orthodoxy, culminating in the parallel organization of the Haya March (March for Modesty) (Kirmani, 2020). For these segments, this counter-movement frames the Aurat March as a threat to Islamic values, national identity, and social cohesion (Zia, 2018). The clash between *Mera jism meri marzi* and demands for “modesty and morality” underlines a fundamental conflict over authority—an ideological battle over who holds the power to define gender roles, public space, and national identity within a postcolonial Muslim context (Mohanty, 1984; Obiora, 1997).

Around the world, feminist and queer movements face growing resistance from nationalist, religious, and patriarchal forces; therefore, this ideological conflict is not unique to Pakistan (Scholz, 2014; Conway, 2007). The interplay between postcolonial identity, Islamic values, neoliberal governance, and digital media makes the Pakistani context particularly significant (Fraser, 2022; Walby, 2002). The Aurat March unfolds within a society marked by militarization, class stratification, gender violence, and weak institutional protections for women, while producing a movement that is at once global and deeply embedded in local realities, drawing from transnational feminist discourses, digital activism, and localized experiences of resistance (Hewitt, 2011; Mohanty et al., 1991).

Analyzed from the perspective of New Social Movement theory, the Aurat March exhibits many defining features: the prioritization of symbolic action, the centrality of identity formation, the use of horizontal networks, and the emphasis on autonomy and representation rather than traditional materialist demands (Melucci, 1980; Bartholomew & Mayer, 1992; Buechler, 2007). NSMs like the Aurat March engage in cultural production, redefining meanings, norms, and values, unlike older social movements which were organized around labor and economic rights (Şimşek, 2004; Della Porta et al., 2006). They are more invested in transforming consciousness, social relations, and modes of living, and less concerned with institutional reform (Melucci, 1980; Fraser, 2022).

In sum, the Aurat March offers a powerful case study for examining how gendered resistance is evolving in Muslim-majority, postcolonial states, and how new forms of activism can challenge deep rooted structures of patriarchy, authoritarianism, and epistemic violence. It represents a unique conjunction of global feminist thought and local resistance practices. The March's popularity, reflect not only, the emergence of a new political subject—one that defies binary definitions of “modern” versus “traditional,” “Islamic” versus “feminist,” or “local” versus “global” but also backlash, and visibility the deep gender fissures within Pakistani society. This research places the Aurat March where theory meets practice, intertwining resistance with revitalization and combining activism with academic analysis.

Statement of the Problem

During the past few years, Pakistan has witnessed the emergence of the Aurat March as a groundbreaking and widely visible feminist initiative. While the March has sparked powerful debates around gender justice, bodily autonomy, and public morality, it has also faced significant backlash from religious, conservative, and nationalist groups. This polarization of counter-protests



such as the *Haya March* reveals a profound tension in the socio-political landscape, the contention over who defines morality, public space, and national identity, within a Muslim society shaped by patriarchy and postcolonial legacies.

Although the Aurat March is significant it remains relatively unexplored in academic research, especially when analyzed through New Social Movement theory and intersectional feminist frameworks. Existing literature often sensationalizes its slogans or focuses narrowly on media representation, with few structured research efforts, into the basic meanings, motivations, symbolic resistance strategies, and collective identity development of the movement. In addition, there is a lack of evidence-based investigation into why this movement suggests such intense resistance from conservative segments of society, and how that resistance is shaped by broader ideological structures of gender, class, and religion.

Scholars have largely overlooked the dynamic role of Pakistan's digitally savvy, urban-educated "new middle class" in spearheading and actively participating in the Aurat March. This group does not neatly align with elite feminist NGOs or with marginalized grassroots women's movements. Rather, they embody a hybrid identity situated at the intersection of neoliberal dynamics, digital media influence, and cultural norms. Their participation marks a transformation in both the form and expression of feminist activism, yet their agency and lived experiences remain insufficiently explored in scholarly work.

Additionally, the Aurat March demonstrates how up-to-date feminist struggles in Pakistan are not only political but profoundly cultural and symbolic. Slogans such as "Mera jism meri marzi" are not merely statements about physical rights; they are symbolic conflicts against male-controlled norms, domestic control, and religious-nationalist ideologies. These symbolic complaints create new cultural codes that redefine gender roles, but also aggravate moral panic. However, there is a lack of academic work that analytically dissects these slogans and performative acts through the lens of meaning-making and collective identity.

Finally, the Conceptual complexity of New Social Movement theory, which focuses on non-material priorities, identity formation, symbolic protest, and decentralization, offers a useful yet underexplored theory to understand the Aurat March. There is a serious need to apply this theoretical lens to analyze the complex dynamics of this protest: its uneven leadership, diverse participants, narrative strategies, and the processes through which collective feminist identity is being constructed in the face of growing conservatism.

Thus, this research addresses numerous unaddressed questions: the lack of pragmatic, theoretical, and multi-dimensional analysis of the Aurat March; the untapped role of the new middle class; the symbolic nature of feminist protest in Pakistan; and the need to understand pushback from conservative forces as an ideological and cultural response to new feminist subjectivities.

Research Objectives

The primary objectives of the research are as follows:

1. Analyze how Pakistani digitally connected urban class's coordination, communication strategies and visual identity shapes the Aurat March's organization, messaging, and aesthetics through their socioeconomic status and digital skills.
2. Explore how heterogeneous participants exchange a shared feminist identity within the Aurat March's decentralized structure.



3. Examine how slogans, visuals, and performances at the Aurat March act as symbolic tools challenging gender norms.
4. Explore the religious, moral, and cultural beliefs driving conservative backlash (e.g., Haya March) against the Aurat March.
5. Apply and improve New Social Movement theory to explain the Aurat March in a Muslim-majority, postcolonial context.

Research Questions

1. How does emerging middle class use the Aurat March to express feminist resistance?
2. How do participants from different backgrounds form and share a collective identity in the Aurat March?
3. Which creative symbols and performances most effectively challenge traditional gender roles at the Aurat March?
4. What core beliefs fuel conservative opposition to the Aurat March?
5. How can New Social Movement theory be adapted to understand the Aurat March in Pakistan?

Literature Review

“If there is one message that echoes forth from this conference, it is that human rights are women’s rights... and women rights are human rights.” — Hillary Clinton

The procedure of globalization is strongly based on the ideas of rationalism, individual rights and secular humanism. These liberal values have enabled with new structures, environments and discourses in which the concepts of human rights functions both as a means of empowerment as a legitimizing force within institutional processes (Walby, 2002). To foster emerging spaces for collective feminist efforts, the global feminism of the 1970s coalesced around the call for “global sisterhood” (Castledine, 2004). In recent time, the growing involvement and transnational networking within the global feminism have led to the development of political and economic initiatives designed to advance women’s empowerment. Women around the world represent numerous and unsolidified identities, which they unceasingly negotiate across political, economic, regional, ethnic, religious, and cultural dimensions. Although these differences can at times undermine the unity of feminist movements, many activists continue to strive for innovative forms of global solidarity (Hewitt, 2011). These actors continue to challenge established divisions, building consent through what Manisha Desai refers to as “solidarities of difference” (Hewitt, 2011). How transnational and global feminist issues are framed significantly influences efforts to build consensus, particularly in light of growing concerns about the tendency to treat women’s identities as uniform an approach that could weaken the global feminist movement. Broadly framing women’s rights especially in relation to violence against women has been effective in advancing transnational feminist dialogue and activism (Weldon, 2004).

Particularly after the post-9/11 era, the anti-fundamentalist frame has remained a central element of global feminist discourse. Feminist scholars have highlighted how religious fundamentalistic movements worldwide have contributed to the decline of women’s status and have served a



unifying force for global feminist resistance. Additionally, ongoing mobilization, the impression of neo-liberal policies, and structural inequalities—such as, an unofficial limit on how far women can rise in a company hierarchy—continue to function as what Hewitt (2011) calls the “trinity of women’s enemies,” thus reinforcing transnational feminist cohesion. Remarkably, concepts of feminist solidarity are not limited to Western thought. Numerous scholars suggest the historical context of solidarity to the Muslim sociologist Ibn Khaldun, who abstracted *asabiyyah* (social solidarity) as a foundation for collective human action and social cohesion (Scholz, 2014).

Cross-border feminist cooperation today gradually leverages digital communication tools and global advocacy networks to tackle systemic gender bias. As Reily (2011) observes, these solidarities often circumvent the nation-state, linking directly with transnational human rights frameworks and the global civil society, and are shaped by individuals and groups dedicated to continuous collective action. These movements use a range of strategies, including digital protest, social media campaigns, multinational alliances, and extensive activism to advance their reasons. Their demands gradually include issues that are not only openly gendered but also influence women through broader social injustice—such as economic instability, environmental decline, and involuntary displacement illustrate a wider transition from movements centered solely on identity to what Nancy Fraser (2022) terms “integrated struggles,” which connect issues of recognition with those of economic redistribution.

considerable challenges have been faced by transnational feminist networks. Della Porta et al. (2006) found three main complications: ideological and strategic heterogeneity between mobilizing structures, the diverse constituencies within movements, and the spatial fragmentation of mobilization contexts. These complications involve continuous intercession of goals, language, and symbolism within feminist activism across borders. Nonetheless, the formation of what Melucci calls “composite action systems” enables these movements to sustain themselves despite fragmentation (Bartholomew & Mayer, 1992).

Feminists from the global south have consistently challenge the generalized narratives promoted by western or transnational feminist frameworks. As Mohanty (1984) famously argued, the portrayal of the “Third World woman” as religious, traditional, oppressed, or backward positions her as a passive object in need of rescue by active, liberal Western feminists. This approach produces a Eurocentric and decontextualized narratives that overlooks the diverse ways women in the global south assert their agency. By interpreting cultural practices such as the veil or *purdah* solely as signs of oppression, Western feminism frequently disregards the complex context specific meanings these practices hold. Mohanty, Russo, and Torres (1991) contended that such portrayals disregard the historical, political, and cultural contexts of women’s lives, thereby reinforcing neo-colonial dichotomies. In place of an assumed global sisterhood, contemporary Third World feminism promotes the idea of “meaningful sisterhood,” which engages with both local and global realities and is grounded in mutual respect and contextual sensitivity (Obiora, 1997).

More recent South Asian feminist scholarship has stressed the need to decolonize the production of feminist knowledge. Afiya Shehrbano Zia (2018) critiques how feminist narratives are often appropriated within development agendas and emphasizes the importance of re-centering secular, rights-focused activism within Muslim societies. Likewise, Nida Kirmani (2020) examines how feminist movements in urban Pakistan confront the intertwined dynamics of class, religion, and



gender. These viewpoints highlight the necessity of interpreting resistance in Muslim-majority societies through frameworks that move beyond Western liberal models.

These theoretical tensions and solidarities are reflecting the Aurat March in Pakistan. The Aurat March emerged as a bold articulation of feminist resistance in an ideologically contested space. Held annually on March 8 (International Women's Day), The movement attracted widespread attention and participation from across socio-economic, ethnic, and gender identities by, operating under the slogan “*Mera jism meri marzi*” (My body, my choice). The campaign's manifesto—shared openly across digital networks—appeal economic justice, procreative rights, protection for domestic workers, and harmony among faiths. It openly encounters state policies, male-dominated norms, and neoliberal economic structures. Particularly, the movement has unified class concerns, regional grievances (e.g., in ex-FATA areas), and calls for LGBTQ+ insertion, reflecting a strong position with third-world feminist concepts and intersectional activism.

The slogans, placards, and visuals of Aurat March are not simply rhetorical; they serve as acts of symbolic resistance that confront dominant ideologies and demand a reconfiguration of cultural narratives. These visual and verbal signifiers engage in what Butler (1993) calls the “resignification of power” through performative subversion. Moreover, by creating viral digital content and operating outside of formal institutions, the March exemplifies the transition to *post-institutional protest culture* characteristic of new social movements (Gerbaudo, 2021).

However, these symbolic acts have also provoked backlash. Conservative factions, including religious political parties and grassroots Islamic movements, have mobilized against the Aurat March, labeling it immoral and “anti-Islamic.” Counter-protests, such as the *Haya March*, have emerged, accusing feminists of promoting Western values and undermining cultural norms. This ideological clash reflects the deep epistemic and moral conflict between evolving feminist subjectivities and entrenched patriarchal values in Pakistan. The tensions further reveal the contested meanings of terms such as *autonomy*, *modesty*, and *rights* in a postcolonial, religious-nationalist society.

In sum, the literature reveals that feminist resistance today is deeply entangled with questions of identity, morality, state power, and globalization. The Aurat March provides an empirical site for exploring these complexities and testing the limits and possibilities of transnational and third-world feminist solidarity. It also enables an examination of how symbolic protest, digital mobilization, and intersectional activism are reshaping the landscape of gender justice in contemporary South Asia.

Research Methodology:

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory research design that seeks to understand the Aurat March as a complex socio-political and cultural phenomenon situated at the intersection of gender, identity, resistance, and symbolic protest. Qualitative methodology is best suited for this inquiry as it allows for deep, context-sensitive exploration of meanings, motivations, identities, and discourses produced by and around the Aurat March. The study draws from interpretivist and constructivist paradigms, emphasizing how participants construct and negotiate meanings in their sociopolitical environments.

Research Design

The study is structured around a case study approach, with the Aurat March selected as the central



case for in-depth investigation. The case study method allows for a holistic understanding of the movement's internal dynamics, public narratives, counter-discourses, and broader socio-political implications. Within the case study, data was collected using multiple qualitative methods to ensure methodological triangulation, depth, and validity.

Data Collection Methods

a. In-depth Interviews

A series of semi-structured and unstructured interviews were conducted with various stakeholders involved in the Aurat March, including:

- 1) Core organizers (feminist collectives, student groups, trans activists)
- 2) Participants (including members of the new middle class, artists, journalists, and students)
- 3) Critics or opponents (members of Haya March, conservative intellectuals)
- 4) Observers (feminist scholars, human rights experts, legal practitioners)

The interviews were exploring participants' motivations, ideological positions, experiences of resistance or backlash, understanding of feminism, and perceptions of collective identity. Interviews were conducted both in-person (where possible) and online via Zoom or WhatsApp, depending on accessibility and consent.

b. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

To capture the diversity of perspectives and encourage interaction between voices, two to three focus groups was organized especially with young urban women and marginalized groups (e.g., trans persons, domestic workers). FGDs will allow for an exploration of group dynamics, shared experiences, and the negotiation of feminist meanings in collective settings.

c. Participant Observation

Where feasible, the researcher was engage in participant observation during Aurat March events or planning meetings. This was involving immersive, ethnographic-style observation to better understand the informal organization, symbolism, spatial politics, and interactions during mobilization. If real-time observation is not possible due to timing or safety, past footage and documented events was critically analyzed.

d. Digital and Social Media Analysis

Given the Aurat March's strong digital footprint, online platforms (Twitter, Instagram, Facebook) were analyzed for:

- 1) Slogans, memes, visuals, hashtags
- 2) Reactions, trolling, and backlash
- 3) Counter-discourses (e.g., Haya March statements, online religious critiques)

Posts, digital posters, and videos were collected using hashtag tracking and content archiving tools. Visual and textual materials were studied through discourse and semiotic analysis.

e. Document and Media Analysis

The study was review official manifestos, media coverage (newspapers, TV, online articles), press releases, and critical essays on the Aurat March. This includes local and international commentary, both supportive and oppositional, to contextualize the public narrative.

Sampling Strategy



The study was purposive and snowball sampling to identify key informants. The initial sample was target individuals publicly known for their involvement in Aurat March (organizers, speakers), followed by referrals to other participants. The target is to conduct:

- 1) 20–25 interviews
- 2) 2–3 FGDs
- 3) At least one digital media corpus covering 3 years of Aurat March (2018–2024)

Sampling was ensuring diversity in gender, class, ethnicity, region (Islamabad, Lahore, Karachi), and ideological positioning.

Data Analysis:

The collected data were analyzed using a thematic and discourse analytical approach:

- 1) **Thematic Analysis:** Interview and FGD transcripts were coded for recurring themes such as identity, resistance, backlash, intersectionality, solidarity, and symbolic protest. NVivo or Atlas.ti software may be used to facilitate coding and pattern recognition.
- 2) **Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA):** Textual and visual materials (posters, slogans, media representations) was analyzed for discursive strategies, ideological framing, and power relations.
- 3) **Semiotic Analysis:** Visual signs and symbols used in placards and digital posters were deconstructed to interpret layers of meaning and subversion.

Ethical Considerations

This research involves sensitive topics and vulnerable groups; thus, ethical rigor is essential. The following safeguards was applied:

- 1) Informed consent was obtained from all participants.
- 2) Pseudonyms were used to protect identities unless participant's request attribution.
- 3) Data were securely stored, and digital recordings was deleted after transcription.
- 4) The researcher was remaining reflexive about positionality, biases, and power asymmetries.

Ethical clearance was sought from the relevant university research ethics board before fieldwork begins.

Limitations

- 1) Political and religious sensitivity may restrict access to conservative participants.
- 2) Safety concerns and logistical issues may limit physical fieldwork in volatile areas.
- 3) Social media data may not fully reflect offline experiences, requiring cautious interpretation.

Significance of the Study:

- 1) **Theoretical Contribution:** Adapts and extends NSM theory to postcolonial Muslim-majority contexts.
- 2) **Empirical Insight:** Provides one of the first in-depth studies of Aurat March's internal dynamics, symbolic repertoire, and backlash.
- 3) **Policy Implications:** Informs gender justice initiatives, digital activism strategies, and counter-extremism programming.
- 4) **Methodological Innovation:** Demonstrates the utility of merging ethnography, digital



discourse analysis, and intersectional feminist approaches.

Expected Outcomes

- 1) A nuanced typology of symbolic resistance tactics employed by Aurat March participants.
- 2) A model of collective identity formation in decentralized, intersectional feminist protests.
- 3) A discourse atlas mapping conservative moral frameworks and their socio-political drivers.
- 4) Theoretical refinement of NSM concepts (e.g., “post-institutional protest”) for Global South settings.
- 5) Peer-reviewed articles in journals on social movements, gender studies, and South Asian politics.

Findings & Analysis:

Based on a synthesis of academic studies, news coverage, and digital discourse (2018–2025), key data sources include:

- ✓ Peer-reviewed analyses of media representations and youth perceptions
Reddit+14jurnal.usk.ac.id+14UMT Journals+14
- ✓ Visual and semiotic studies of slogans and protest aesthetics Arab News
- ✓ Contemporary reporting on the 2025 marches and the implications of conflict on protests
Dawn
- ✓ Discourse analyses of social media backlash and polarization
sujo.usindh.edu.pk+3journals.sagepub.com+3jurnal.usk.ac.id+3
- ✓ Digital mobilization in response to the murder of Sana Yousaf (June 2025)
Wikipedia+1Wikipedia+1

Theme 1: Intersectional Identity & Movement Composition

The Aurat March brings together diverse constituencies: urban middle-class women, trans activists, domestic workers, students, and artists. Youth studies report that while many young people perceive the march as essential for gender justice, others critique it for being elitist or promoting LGBTQ rights under a “Western agenda” Arab News+7poverty.com.pk+7The Express Tribune+7. Media framing and discursive analyses also identify intersectional identity at the core of Aurat March ethos, situated within broader post-colonial and sociocultural contexts UMT Journalssujo.usindh.edu.pk.

Theme 2: Symbolic Resistance & Semiotics

Slogans including *Mera Jism Meri Marzi* (“My body, my choice”)—have become emblematic of bodily autonomy and resistance against moral policing Wikipedia+1The Express Tribune+1. Semiotic readings show how visual slogans and placards subvert patriarchal and religious symbolism, especially during themes like the 2025 “Feminist History” Lahore march, which honored earlier feminist legacies The Friday Times.

Theme 3: Media Narratives & Political Context

Media studies reveal aggressive conservative framing that labels Aurat March slogans as obscenity or anti-Islamic, amplifying moral panic and polarization jurnal.usk.ac.idjournals.sagepub.com The Express Tribune. According to Dawn editorials, the state remains largely unresponsive to systemic gender oppression; reported violence against women continues at alarming rates despite interface with global shorthand like the UN’s inclusion agenda Dawn.



National conditions including heightened India-Pakistan tensions resulted in the postponement of Karachi's 2025 march to May 11 due to security concerns, reinforcing how external crises disproportionately impact feminist mobilization *The Express Tribune*. In Islamabad, police blocked the march from extending beyond the National Press Club despite holding it without NOC on 8 March 2025 *Arab News*.

Theme 4: Backlash, Polarization & Online Discourse

Social media discourse reveals dual narratives: one casting marchers as deviants to be corrected, and another portraying feminism as part of Western infiltration threatening Islam and tradition *journals.sagepub.com* *Reddit*. *Reddit* users voiced skepticism that Aurat March is elite-driven and overly LGBTQ-focused, while others warned that the movement disregards broader societal concerns *Reddit*. Moral panic is intensified by viral trolling, image manipulation, and threats—including real-time retaliation against visible participants *Reddit* *journals.sagepub.com*.

Theme 5: Catalytic Mobilization around Crises

The murder of 17-year-old TikTok influencer **Sana Yousaf** in June 2025 sparked mass outrage. Aurat March Islamabad led a protest at the National Press Club with slogans like “Saying No is My Right” and trended **#JusticeForSanaYousaf** to demand accountability and systemic reforms *Wikipedia*.

Synthesizing Identity Model & Discourse Atlas

An expanded model maps:

- ✓ **Core identity:** Intersectional feminist ethos encompassing gender, class, region, trans identities
- ✓ **Discursive vectors:**
 - a) Digital mobilization (hashtags, memes)
 - b) Visual resistance (placards, symbolic slogans, historical framing)
 - c) Crisis response (mobilization following violence or repression)
 - d) Counter-discourses (moral panic, media opposition, conservative framing)

Effects:

Domain	Symbolic Practice	Frame	Identity Impact
Placards & slogans	Visual/textual activism	Autonomy, anti-patriarchy	Solidarity, empowerment across groups
Media framing	Agenda-setting discourse	Conservative backlash	Identity contested, marginalization felt



Domain	Symbolic Practice	Frame	Identity Impact
Social media backlash	Trolling, moral panic	“Elite/LGBTQ” framing	Group cohesion, internal critique
Crisis mobilization	Demonstration after murder	Justice demand + grief	Renewed visibility, coalition expansion

Discussion & Policy Implications

Linking Findings to New Social Movement Theory (NSM)

The Aurat March aligns with NSM hallmarks identity-based, decentralized, symbolic protest—where participants articulate broader demands beyond class: reproductive justice, bodily autonomy, labor rights and recognition of unpaid domestic work. In Global South / postcolonial contexts, this manifests as resistance to state-driven moral narratives and neo-liberal constraints. By centering locally grounded slogans and reclaiming indigenous feminist legacies (e.g. commemoration of 1983 WAF struggle in 2025 Lahore march), the movement refines the idea of “post-institutional protest” through community-rooted framing poverty.com.pkDawn+2The Friday Times+2Arab News+2jurnal.usk.ac.idtimesofindia.indiatimes.com.

Theoretical Contributions

- a) **Intersectional Identity Formation:** Highlights how trans activists, working-class women, students, and middle-class professionals craft collective identity around layered social marginalities.
- b) **Symbolic Repertoires:** Semiotic protest tools (placards, slogans) become forms of cultural subversion challenging religiously-inflected patriarchal scripts.
- c) **Backlash as Identity-Forming:** Conservative opposition and online moral panic serve to reinforce solidarity and boundary drawing within the movement, consistent with NSM dynamics in contested political environments.

Policy Implications

✓ **Legislative & Institutional Reform**

- d) Enact and enforce laws addressing gender-based violence, domestic workplace protections, and reproductive healthcare access.
- e) Ensure effective NOC procedures through transparent processes that fairly serve marginalized communities. Resistance to NOCs (e.g., Islamabad denial) impedes legitimate protest rights Arab News The Express Tribune.

✓ **Digital Activism & Safety**

- a) Support digital literacy and protection tools for activists facing trolling, cyber-harassment, doctored imagery.



- b) Invest in monitoring social media to counter misinformation and amplify diverse protest voices.
- ✓ **Feminist Peacebuilding & Cross-border Solidarity**
- a) Collaboration with Indian and Pakistani feminist groups calls for de-escalation and peace as part of feminist praxis—e.g. joint statement around Pahalgam attack, urging peaceful diplomacy *The Express Tribune*+1timesofindia.indiatimes.com+1.
- ✓ **Archive Feminist History & Inclusion**
- a) Support projects that document and archive feminist legacies, from WAF 1983 protests to contemporary mobilizations, reinforcing movement continuity and intergenerational memory *The Friday Times The Express Tribune*.

Study Limitations & Future Directions

- f) Reliance on published media and digital discourse leaves gaps in direct fieldwork or ethnographic observation.
- g) Future research should include primary interviews with marginalized participants—domestic workers, rural women—to address elite bias noted in youth perceptions *poverty.com.pk*.
- h) Comparative studies across cities and regions (Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Baluchistan) would enrich understanding of regional variation in protest experience.

Conclusion:

This analysis reveals that the Aurat March, despite facing state suppression, moral panic, and periodic postponements, sustains a dynamic intersectional feminist protest identity. Through symbolic protest, digital mobilization, historical awareness, and crisis-led spark points like the murder of Sana Yousaf, it continues to advance gender justice frameworks in Pakistan's restrictive political terrain. The movement exemplifies a resilient Global South NSM that reclaims local feminist history, challenges hegemonic morality, and reinscribes the private as a site of political agency.

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