

**FEMINIST VISUAL SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF PROTEST ART AT *AURAT MARCH*
IN PAKISTAN**

by © Zainab Anwar (Thesis) submitted

to the School of Graduate Studies in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Masters in Gender Studies

Memorial University of Newfoundland

August 2023

St. John's Newfoundland and Labrador

Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
General Summary	iv
List of Figures	v
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
1.1 Literature Review	5
1.2 Theoretical Approach and Significance	11
1.3 Methods	15
Chapter 2: History of Feminism in Pakistan and <i>Aurat March</i>	20
Chapter 3: Gender-based Violence	29
Chapter 4: Women's Labor	49
Chapter 5: Women's Health	66
Chapter 6: Freedoms and Justice	85
Conclusion	101
Works Cited	105

Abstract

My thesis involves a feminist visual semiotic analysis to look at the protest art from *Aurat March* in Pakistan. I look mainly at the protest posters but also include a few examples of street art to give a holistic overview of the marches. In my research I have looked at posters published on online social media accounts of *Aurat March* and images of posters or protest art from the offline physical protest that are present online. My analysis of the posters and street art includes discussion of the three semiotic signs: symbolic, iconic, and indexical, to focus on the messages and the impact of the protest art and bring light to specific issues in relation to Gender-based violence, Women's labor, Women's health, and Freedoms and Justice in Pakistan. I talk about posters in each chapter individually and talk about how they work together to present the issues impacting the lives of Pakistani people. Lastly, I explain why posters and street art from *Aurat March* are radical and different than posters in other social or political movements in Pakistan.

Keywords: Feminist protest art, poster art, visual semiotic analysis, feminist semiotic analysis, social media activism, symbolic, iconic, indexical, *Aurat March*, Pakistan.

General Summary

Aurat March is an annual feminist protest movement that takes place in major cities of Pakistan. It consists of both online and offline modes of protest with people participating by joining the physical protest or interacting with the movement through social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Posters and street art form a big part of the movement and give it the visibility that has made it popular in Pakistan. In my thesis, I look at the posters and street art from *Aurat March* and analyze them using a Feminist Visual Semiotic approach. A Feminist Visual Semiotic Analysis is the way certain shapes, colors, symbols, or forms are used to create meaning of signs that are often overlooked or neglected. I use my analysis of the posters and street art to discuss how *Aurat March* plays a significant role in bringing attention to several key socio-political, gender-based, and religious issues faced by people in Pakistan.

List of Figures

- Figure a: “Posters from Aurat March on the streets of Lahore.” 22 February. 2020, @auratmarchlahore. 28
- Figure b: “Protesters carrying *Aurat March* posters.” 19 February. 2022, @WAFLaHore (twitter). 28
- Figure 1: “Poster about sexual violence produced for Aurat March.” 25 February. 2020, @auratazadimarch. 29
- Figure 2: “Poster about sexual violence produced for *Aurat March*.” 6 March. 2020, @auratazadimarch. 31
- Figure 3: “Poster about women empowerment produced for *Aurat March*.” 6 March. 2020, @auratmarchquetta. 33
- Figure 4: “Poster about patriarchal violence produced for *Aurat March*.” 24 February. 2021, @auratmarch. 35
- Figure 5: “Poster about Gender-based Violence produced for Aurat March.” 6 March. 2020, @auratmarchquetta. 37
- Figure 6.1: Ahmed, R Umaima. “Street art installation produced for *Aurat March*.” 2021, *Global Voices.org*. 40
- Figure 6.2 “Street Art produced for *Aurat March*.” 2021, *Twitter*. 41
- Figure 7: “Poster about Female Genital Mutilation produced for *Aurat March*.” 12 November. 2019, @shehzilm. 42

Figure 8: “Poster about safe public spaces for women produced for <i>Aurat March</i> .” 16 February. 2021, @auratmarch.	43
Figure 9: Poster about domestic violence produced for <i>Aurat March</i> .” 25 February. 2021, @auratmarch.	44
Figure 10: Poster about domestic violence produced for <i>Aurat March</i> .” 25 February. 2021, @auratmarch.	45
Figure 11: “Poster about Women’s Labor produced for <i>Aurat March</i> .” 6 February. 2022, @auratmarch.	49
Figure 12: “Poster about domestic labor produced for <i>Aurat March</i> .” 2 March. 2022, @auratmarch.	51
Figure 13: “Poster about domestic workers produced for <i>Aurat March</i> .” 6 March. 2022, @auratmarch.	53
Figure 14: “Poster about Female Frontline Health Workers produced for <i>Aurat March</i> .” 1 March. 2021, @auratazadimarch.	55
Figure 15: Poster about Women’s Labor produced for <i>Aurat March</i> .” 19 February. 2022, @auratmarch.	56
Figure 16: “Poster about domestic workers produced for <i>Aurat March</i> .” 20 February. 2022, @auratmarch.	58
Figure 17: “Poster about low wage manual workers produced for <i>Aurat March</i> .” 18 February. 2022, @auratmarch.	59

- Figure 18: “Poster about workers produced for *Aurat March*.” 13 October. 2020, @auratazadimarch. 60
- Figure 19: “Street Art about women’s labor produced for *Aurat March*.” 7 March. 2021, @auratazadimarch. 62
- Figure 20: “Street Art about women’s labor produced for *Aurat March*.” 7 March. 2021, @auratazadimarch. 63
- Figure 21: “Poster about women’s health crisis produced for *Aurat March*.” 15 February. 2021, @auratmarchlahore. 66
- Figure 22: “Poster about Women’s reproductive health produced for *Aurat March*.” 23 February. 2021, @auratmarchlahore. 69
- Figure 23: “Poster about menstrual health awareness produced for *Aurat March*.” 27 February. 2022, @auratmarch. 70
- Figure 24: “Poster about women’s reproductive rights produced for *Aurat March*.” 9 March. 2018, @auratmarch. 72
- Figure 25: “Poster about Women Healthcare workers produced for *Aurat March*.” 28 February. 2021, @auratmarchlahore. 73
- Figure 26: “Poster about Disability Justice produced for *Aurat March*.” 2 March. 2021, @auratazadimarch. 75
- Figure 27: “Poster about patriarchal violence produced for *Aurat March*.” 3 March. 2021, @auratazadimarch. 76

Figure 28: “Poster about Women’s Health produced for <i>Aurat March</i> .” 18 February. 2021, @auratmarchlahore.	80
Figure 29: “Poster about women healthcare workers produced for <i>Aurat March</i> ,” 6 March. 2021, @auratmarch.	81
Figure 10: “Poster about women healthcare workers produced for <i>Aurat March</i> .” 22 February. 2021, @auratmarchlahore.	82
Figure 31: “Poster about women’s empowerment produced for <i>Aurat March</i> .” 15 February. 2021, @auratazadimarch.	85
Figure 32: “Poster about Forced Conversions” produced for <i>Aurat March</i> . 4 March. 2021, @auratmarch.	87
Figure 33: “Poster about enforced disappearances of Balochi Women produced for <i>Aurat March</i> .” 25 February. 2021, @auratazadimarch.	88
Figure 34: “Poster about education for young girls produced for <i>Aurat March</i> .” 5 February. 2022, @auratamarchlahore.	90
Figure 35: Poster about Religious Discrimination produced for <i>Aurat March</i> .” 7 March. 2021, @auratazadimarch.	91
Figure 36: “Poster about Acid Attacks produced for <i>Aurat March</i> .” 27 February. 2021, @auratmarch.	93
Figure 37: “Poster about women’s solidarity produced for <i>Aurat March</i> .” 25 February. 2022, @auratmarchlahore.	94

Figure 38: “Poster about women’s solidarity produced for *Aurat March*.” 26 February. 2022,
@auratmarchlahore. 96

Figure 40: “Poster about Feminist Futures produced for *Aurat March*.” 7 February. 2022,
@auratmarch. 98

Chapter 1: Introduction

My thesis is focused on feminist protest art – primarily posters- in relation to *Aurat March*¹ which is a popular feminist protest movement in Pakistan that began in 2018. It takes place every year either on or near the International Women’s Day in several major cities of Pakistan such as Lahore, Islamabad, Karachi, Rawalpindi, and Multan. My interest in *Aurat March* stems from the fact that many people support the *March* in person or online and that it has provided a platform for people to come together each year and bring attention to either their own individual issues or provide support the cause of another group asking for their rights or better treatment. This kind of momentum and efforts are crucial because feminism has a very negative perception in Pakistan whereby people advocating for gender equality are often seen as vile or corrupted by Western agenda because of the notion that feminist protest threatens traditional heteronormative, patriarchal, and religious values of the society (Batool 326). I have never participated in *Aurat March* in person, but I have been aware of it since 2019. I have followed it online and was grateful for this opportunity to be a part of a feminist protest movement and talk about women’s rights and concerns.

Aurat March as a movement has been able to create a space for itself in face of all the resistances and violence presented to this movement each year. For instance, harassment by the reporters in person at the *March*, online harassment and trolling for participants, and rape and death threats to prominent feminist activists taking part in the *March* (Hamdani) are some examples of the kind of violences faced by the *March*. I intend to look at its protest art as symbolic of the space that the *March* has made for feminist protest in Pakistan in both online and offline

¹ Text in Urdu language is italicized in this paper.

spheres. As each year regardless of the pressures from the people opposing the *March* or the fear of harassment, a huge majority of people still gather for the *March* and use the space created by the *March* to fight for their rights. The reason that the posters and protest art as a medium of feminist protest art are particularly helpful in spreading these messages is because of the visceral reaction that they draw from the viewers due to their graphic contents and the ease of dissemination that allows for the message to be communicated to a wider range of people regardless of geographical location or availability of internet access. In relation to other events, political marches, and representations of gender-based issues, the posters in this *March* are overt and explicit about their meanings and impact.

Though it is a very young movement, only six years old, *Aurat March* is important because of how it has united people across the country and involved them in discussions of gender equality and social justice, whether these people are the supporters of the *March* or its opponents – those who resist the *March* and consider it as an elitist movement that purports western agendas. In this way, the *Aurat March* has become important, even if it faces a lot of opposition each year. *Aurat March* started with people bringing in their own posters highlighting their individual concerns such as women talking about sexual harassment and domestic abuse for instance. But eventually it has evolved into a movement with specific focus each year. For example, in 2021 the focus was on Women's Health Crisis. And since then, *Aurat March* has a comprehensive list of demands² based on specific social justice issues which the participants of the *March* will be focusing on in the *March* that year. But there are no thematic restrictions and people still use the *Aurat March* to bring attention to their own specific socio-political issues, such as trans community using *Aurat*

² There were demands before 2021 made by individuals or groups as well but since 2021 onwards these demands have been presented in a comprehensive manner by the official *Aurat March* social media pages.

March to talk about violence against trans women, and ethnic minorities using the *March* to talk about the injustices against them.

Amongst the various posters and protest art for the *March*, the topics that I have chosen to look at in my thesis are Gender-based violence, Women's Labor, Women's Health, and lastly Freedoms. The reason being that these topics encompass a myriad of gender-based and socio-political issues impacting the lives of women, primarily, but also other minority groups in the country as well. The *March* allows for people fighting for these issues to list their demands through their poster art. Posters for the *March* that are found on the official social media accounts of the *March* are illustrated by graphic designers and artists who are supporters of the *March*. These artists most often remain anonymous to avoid online harassment, and only few of them actually share their identities. Other than that, people participating in the *March* bring in their own posters, whether in alignment to the *March's* focus that year or to talk about socio-political and gender-based issues of their community.

It is this aspect of the *March* that I will focus on because it is the public face of the *March*. Not everyone who is impacted by the issues addressed by the *March* will be informed, or able to inform themselves on the topics, or feel they can overtly discuss some of the topics addressed in the *March*. But they would be able to access visually the images depicting, describing, and drawing together issues that people are experiencing, to connect with these representations, or to see their own experiences shared by others just like I have been able to for a couple of years. These posters have the capacity to create communities, and the visual impact of their messages is something I have found engaging for a long time. The visual aspect of the posters does a different sort of work than the speeches and documents describing the issues. This is why I am keen to explore their

visual impact in my thesis albeit in a limited sense i.e., in terms of the kind of issues they convey about Pakistani people, particularly women.

Aurat March posters are distributed both in the online space through social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, and in the offline physical space by disseminating their printed copies across the cities where the marches take place. This means the reach of these posters goes beyond the streets of the *March* itself and into people's hands and homes, via their technologies, allowing people to participate in the *March* in many ways. Also, street art plays an important role in engaging people because it works with the public nature of the posters to emphasize the messages and I focus on both the online and in person aspects of the images from the *March*.

I am interested in protest art made for *Aurat March* because it serves several crucial purposes for the *March*, specifically spreading awareness about the *March*'s focus each year, informing people about the date, timing, and location of the *March*, and engaging potential new participants and communities to the causes publicized in the *March*. Further, the posters found in the *March* contain powerful imagery and illustrations that deliver strong messages about the struggles of primarily women, but also transgender and non-binary people, ethnic and religious minorities, and low-wage workers, for instance. Finally, protest art from *Aurat March* is important because it is a means of representing the unique experiences and struggles of Pakistani people in ways that appeal to a Pakistani point of view, set of concerns, and cultural context of understanding. Hence, my primary research question is "What does the protest art from *Aurat March* tell us about the specific socio-political, economic, and gender-based issues of Pakistani people?".

I examine this protest art not only in the physical space of the *March* but also in the online space of the social media platform of Instagram because social media is a fundamental avenue for feminist protest and in Pakistan (Rehman 153). To conduct this examination, I use a feminist approach to semiotic analysis that is rooted in an understanding of visual culture. The changes in feminist methodologies in recent years brought about by young scholars and activists point to a need for ways of interpreting that are more inclusive and provide an adequate representation of fluctuating intersections of identity and experience. For instance, Mary Margaret Fonow and Judith A. Cook mention that there have been efforts by feminists and scholars to move a step ahead from just talking about accessibility and exclusion, and to actually look at different categories of gender and its interplay with social differences. And this has led to new discussions about methods (Fonow and Cook 2230). As a result, with my approach towards methods based in feminist visual semiotic analysis, namely the ways that certain shapes, symbols, or forms are made to stand in for certain ideas in various way to various audiences to create meaning (Mieke Bal, Quoting Caravaggio), I aim to account for a contextual understanding of feminist research that looks at the struggle of participants and supporters of the *Aurat March*.

Literature Review

Feminist protest in Pakistan has evolved owing to the introduction of the internet and other technological innovations. The mediums of protest are expanding, from offline physical protest to online protest, and in some instances a coalition of both these mediums to include different groups of people by increasing the accessibility of the protest. In this context, women have learned different strategies to make their voices heard such as colluding with political party leaders who align with their ideals or goals for instance. They join their efforts in the form of street protest with the help that they get from influential political parties to increase the impact of their claims and

protests to ensure that they are heard and that their efforts are not in vain. Also, street protests ensure that they avoid their voices from being drowned or silenced by strict media censoring and opposition to different political thoughts (Khan et al. 106). Hence, protestors have had to learn and adopt different ways to protest. And feminist protest in Pakistan has had a history of strategizing to create opportunities for social and political action (Nazneen and Okech 242). *Aurat March* is one such example of such a framework of protest that combines street protest with online social media and cyberactivism to amplify the voices of protestors.

Aurat March - which began in 2018 and takes place every year on or around the International Women's Day - is an important phenomenon because it has brought the feminist struggles in Pakistan to a forefront. In a country where terms like "feminism" and "feminist" mainly have very negative connotations as they are considered un-Islamic (Islam is the majority religion in Pakistan), raising discussions that center around feminism and women's struggles is a huge feat. *Aurat March* is so widely recognized by feminists and even those who do not support feminism because it has brought focus to women's and non-binary people's struggles in Pakistan. In doing so, it has elevated the discussions about their problems from outside round tables to bigger and fundamental political debates in the country (Batoool and Malik 320). Although, the movement faces a lot of resistance and violent opposition, it is important because it has paved the way for breaking down the traditionally set notions of gender politics in Pakistan which are characterized by orthodox beliefs regarding gender norms and identities.

The use of social media as a platform for both activism and uniting supporters has been an important approach for feminist protestors and there has been increasing research on the nature of online activism, and its benefits and shortcomings. For instance, Hartley et al. talk about how online communities add to social movements, while they also mention their limitations, in their

article “How Activists Respond to Social Structure in Offline and Online Contexts”. According to the results of a qualitative study of online activists, the authors of this article illustrate how contributions to online activism and social movements are made primarily by the members of online communities responsible for organizing the movement. The key point of this study is the fact that for activists, online communities are important because they are often the quickest source of broadly distributed information regarding the different ideals, goals, and strategies of a certain movement for instance (Hartley et al. 393). This is why the online component of this movement is just as important as compared to the offline component.

The online component is equally important also because of how protests have been treated historically in Pakistan. Considering the opposition of political dissent and the vulnerability of people who are protesting in the face of threats of bodily harm and violence, cyberactivism has become an important tool of protest for people in Pakistan (Saeed et al. 11). People in Pakistan – through countless experiences of violent opposition and consequences for voicing their opinions – have learned new ways to protest in a manner that gives them at least some level of safety through online activism and protest. Hence, cyberactivism is essential to the feminist struggle in Pakistan because it allows people to voice their opinions freely to an extent, without having to worry about their safety. For instance, using a pseudonym name or identity allows protestors not just in Pakistan but overseas to openly express their views without worrying about the immediate violent consequences (Ziya 18). Therefore, by allowing people to maintain a certain level of distance and privacy, cyberactivism lets people in Pakistan voice their opinions at least more freely than in offline activism.

Cyberactivism often comes under scrutiny because of two things. First, the online space of social media activism reflects the inequalities of the offline and physical space of feminist

activism. That is, just as offline physical protests are investigated in terms of accessibility and exclusion, cyberactivism is scrutinized for issues of marginalization. For instance, in “Introduction: Privilege and Difference in (Online) Feminist Activism”, Laura Portwood-Stacer and Susan Berridge bring this point up. They talk about whether the online space of cyberactivism is inclusive and accessible for different marginalized groups such as people of color, working class people or people with special needs (Portwood-Stacer and Berridge 519). Therefore, I acknowledge that though my analysis of protest art on Instagram as a source for dissemination of information and spreading awareness regarding *Aurat March* is helpful in illuminating various socio-political issues of different groups and the efforts of the *March*, there are still certain members of the community that are excluded from this discussion in the online space due to the nature of cyberactivism.

Second, cyberactivism comes under scrutiny because of its potential to reduce or dampen meaningful actions i.e., “slacktivism”. According to Skoric, slacktivism is when people in the online sphere are involved in tasks that are easily performed such as voicing their opinions on social media, liking, or sharing a post for example. These tasks make people feel like they have done their part in activism and then do not feel the need to do something that actually leads to political action (Skoric 78). However, with respect to my research I want to differentiate between slacktivists and people who are genuinely worried for their safety and thus choose to play a minimal role in the protest. While there is no sure way to distinguish between these two groups, I want to argue that not all people who limit themselves to liking or voicing their opinions on social media are slacktivists.

The importance of poster protest art is owing to the increasing role of visual culture in social movement and protest studies (Casas 362). In relation to social media protest and

cyberactivism, visual culture can consist of a range of varying visual media and activist videos and political posters are just two of these components. According to Brown et al., political protest posters are important markers of social practice for both their political and pedagogical value (Brown et al. 81). In their journal article, the authors explain how there is a need to examine poster protest art for more than just the purposes of graphic design and communication but also in terms of its role in social movements. This social aspect of poster art, they argue, has not been emphasized enough by researchers currently. For instance, Kauffman explains how posters are an important part of political protests because they illustrate key information about the political movements such as what it represents and what influence it has on people (Kauffman 4). Poster art from *Aurat March* is an important source of information about the movement that is delivered in accessible, meaningful, memorable, and instructive ways that are also easily repeated and shared in various social groups in the community.

Also, posters such as the ones in *Aurat March* are a powerful means of protest in social movements because of a number of other reasons, as well. First, posters can be used to link a political or social movement situated in a certain geographical location, such as Pakistan, to larger audiences³. Second, due to the nature of the protest art mainly the fact that it lasts longer than the protest, it serves to prolong the effect of the protest (Kądrzycka 17). Third, protest art such as posters, placards, banners are easy and cheap to produce, and multiple copies of them can be printed at the same time. Fourth, as Hannah Awcock argues, protest posters (that are printed in public spaces) use the public space to extend the political and social debates which are a focus of

³ An interesting observation in relation is that although posters and street art from *Aurat March* talk about gender-based and other issues based in Pakistan, the text on these posters often times also includes an English translation or is in English entirely. There is a possibility that this was motivated keeping in mind the global audiences of the *March* online.

these posters, from outside of a privileged minority to other members of the city as well (Awcock 525). This is why it is crucial to look at the role of protest art in relation to *Aurat March* in Pakistan. Though feminist public art has been a medium of political protest in Pakistan in the past as well, the poster art in *Aurat March* has a specific focus on inclusion and diversity. According to Alam, “The Pakistani women’s movement’s newest wave seeks visibility. Marches in major cities, television and print media interviews, graphic poster designs, and social media interventions are affective political strategies that publicize alternative modes of womanhood” (Alam 6). The posters used in the *Aurat March* are simple, accessible, use bold colors, and they get the message across. They are made by local artists and graphic designers throughout the country, who work on them individually and yet they all have a singular focus: to ensure that voices of marginalized groups are heard, and their struggles are seen.

In relation to the increasing role of visual culture in social movement and media studies, research in recent years has also considered the evolving nature of visual culture with respect to the growing prevalence of technology and of computer-mediated devices. Thus, for instance, Alice Mattoni and Simon Teune talk about a need for scholars of social movements to include questions about how the role of images and videos relating to activism and protest has changed due to the increasing use of technology for information dissemination. According to Mattoni and Teune, an important aspect of research of different visual media practices is to look at its role in a visual culture (Mattoni and Teune 883). In relation to my research on feminist protest art for *Aurat March*, I have chosen to follow the method of feminist visual semiotic analysis and look at online and offline protest art (in form of posters and street art) because a semiotic analysis allows me to focus on specifically visual elements of the posters that do much of the informing and inspiring work for

the protests, such as symbolisms, color, perspective, style, and impact. My aim is to look at the visual culture of *Aurat March* pertaining to the online and offline space of social media.

Theoretical Approach and Significance

Feminist activism has evolved over time and so has the concept of feminism. As a result, there have been discussions surrounding the ambiguities involving the definition of feminist political activism and efforts have been made to understand this form of activism with respect to its differences from other kinds of socio-political activism. Theresa Man Ling Lee defines feminist activism as civic engagement in consideration of the fact that feminist activism is important for the freedom of democracy and for individual freedoms as well (Lee 165). While for Jessalyn Keller an understanding of feminist activism is incomplete without considering the social positioning of its participants and their “particular material, social, and political constraints” (Keller 262). Consequently, there is no one dominating narrative that defines feminist activism but there is a singular focus that all these scholars’ conceptions of feminist activism have which is on “creating change”.

Feminist Protest Art puts this focus forward, as its primary purpose is to open discourses and create change. As regards activist art, Ai Weiwei as quoted by Lentz et al. describes, “all art has the capacity to change how people view the world” (Lentz et al. 56). The notion of change is essential in relation to poster protest art because there is a very real threat to the safety and well-being of the marginalized communities who are the focus of the protest art. The posters are being used to bring light to the struggles and hardships of these people, to advocate for reform, and to alleviate the multifaceted issues that are plaguing different communities in Pakistan by focusing political awareness on them. Therefore, in my paper I move forward with the understanding of feminist activism not in terms of it having certain parameters or following a distinct definition but

rather in terms of focusing on the ability to create possibilities for change in form of political awareness and awareness of the severe, lasting impact that these socio-economic and cultural issues have on the lives of the people in the poster. And in relation to my research, I show how protest art has helped in opening up mediums of discussion regarding socio-economic and political issues that were previously neglected in the mainstream political discourse.

Also, there has been discussion surrounding the generational divide that is presented by contemporary feminist activism. A lot of people refer to the current age of feminism with its technological advances and cyberactivism as the fourth wave of feminism but Cohen et al., while talking about contemporary feminist activism, highlight why such an understanding of feminism is problematic. According to these scholars, the primary issue of such an approach is that it ignores the differences present within each generation (Cohen and Jackson 789). According to Cohen the approach towards contemporary feminism should be focused more on the ideological differences rather than technological ones amongst different feminists and activists because even people without technological differences can have different opinions and ideologies.

In addition, it is important to consider the emancipation of different feminist activist movements across recent years from a global solidarity framework to a more locally positioned framework for instance because this allows for a deeper understanding of how feminist activism has evolved. As Felix Anderl argues, there are benefits of this emancipation for the participants and supporters of the movements as well. The most important of them is a central focus on place and particularity in terms of looking at feminist coalitions in the postcolonial frameworks of global activism and social justice (Anderl 13). The reason why such an approach is important in terms of positionality for feminist activism is because it allows for a discussion of the specific socio-economic and political issues of people who are the focus of a certain movement. For instance,

Aurat March's 2021 theme "Women's Health Crisis" discussed the hardships and limitations faced by healthcare workers the *March* highlighted the need for feminist healthcare. Therefore, I also draw on Felix Anderl's understanding of feminist activism moving away from solidarity towards difference because it provides reflexivity in terms of geographical location and positionality as well.

Apart from that, social media as a space for feminist protest movements has played a crucial role in expansion of feminist spaces from the offline to online sphere as well. It allows for people from various social groups to take part in the protest movements regardless of their social or ethnic background. As Emma Turley and Jenny Fisher discuss in "Tweeting Back While Shouting Back: Social Media and Feminist Activism", digital spaces of social media are essential to the development of feminist movements in this age of technological development. They talk about the benefits of cyberactivism and social media in terms of opening more feminist spaces and allowing for greater discussions of feminist thoughts and ideals (Turley and Fisher 129). Also, Bronwyn Carlson et al. explain how social media activism has become essential for its ability to use emotion as one of the fundamental aspects of visual media of protest. According to these scholars, a focus on emotion that is made possible through different forms of visual media of protest provided by social media activism allows protestors to bring to light several issues that are concerns of the political movements (Bronwyn et al 51). Thus, social media activism is not simply an imitation of the protests in offline or physical spaces but has its own structural benefits and limitations.

Feminist activism in the digital space of social media is interesting because just as it reflects the inequalities and limitations of the offline physical space, this reflection of people's struggles can be helpful in empowering them as well. This is made possible through the nature of social media feminist activism which creates a correlation between the online and offline realm of

activism. As Aristeia Fotopoulou talks about in “Feminist Activism and Digital Networks” “bio digital vulnerability helps us understand the complex dynamics of content production and control that constitute online networks as contradictory spaces of both vulnerability and empowerment for feminist and queer politics” (Fotopoulou 4). According to Fotopoulou, the vulnerabilities of different social groups as made apparent through feminist activism in the digital space can be helpful in illustrating the myriad of issues faced by these groups. For instance, social media or cyberactivism highlights the violence and harassment that women often face for their political views: being trolled, suffering from sexist and misogynistic narratives, and being subjected to threats of physical and sexual violence. Thus, with the research of poster art it is important to remember that digital spaces are not utopian spaces either and have their own inequalities and limitations.

Semiotics, according to Julia Kristeva, have the ability to be disruptive and challenge the fixed and taken-for-granted notions associated with systems of power, such as patriarchy and authority (Kristeva 514). This is because semiotics undermines the existing symbolic order of society by exposing the open, never-completely-realized and culturally situated nature of meaning. It does this because of its “permanent process of sign making and interpreting and the development of conceptual tools that help us to grasp that process as it goes on in various areas of cultural activity” (Bal et al. 174). In other words, nothing is “fixed”, and the process of deriving meaning is constant.

Apart from that, Duncum describes visual culture as a field of study that draws upon several theoretical perspectives and consists of two important approaches: the visual element or ways of seeing and “an expanded range of visual artifacts that lie beyond the art institution” (Duncum 104). Since visual culture can mean a lot of things there is no one distinct definition that encompasses

its meaning, but for the purpose of my paper I will be looking at the feminist views of visual culture. “Informed, intersectionally, by other complex theories of identity and meaning, feminist scholarship...can expand but also refine how we think about identity and visuality as well as the conceptual categories that are central to our work, such as history, experience, and difference” (Doyle and Jones 614). A feminist view of visual culture will allow for an understanding of visual culture that extends from just a critique of visual representations and adds to our understandings of different identity categories.

Methods

For the purpose of my research, I have chosen to focus primarily on the official Instagram pages of *Aurat March* i.e., @auratmarch, @auratazadimarch, @auratmarchlahore, @auratmarchquetta, and have selected protest art made by feminist visual artists that are shared on this page. The online spaces, i.e., the Instagram accounts get a lot of engagement, in form of likes, comments, and shares, and the posters made or shared on these accounts convey information about slogans of each year’s *March*. In addition to posters from these pages, I have included a few examples of street art from other sites as well for reference and because street art bolsters in a more permanent way the performed messages of the *March*.

I have chosen ten posters and pictures of street art per chapter, forty altogether, that resonated the most with me for my analysis. I began my research with looking at as many posters as I could but realized that Gender-based violence, Women’s Health, Women’s Labor, and Freedoms and Justice are some overarching themes that can be found in the posters and street art of the *March*, so I have categorized the posters into these four chapters. The reason for ten posters per chapter is that I attempt to show how issues talked about in each chapter can impact the lives of people in Pakistan in different ways, i.e., gender-based violence can take many forms, and lack

of freedom and justice for Pakistani people can take many forms. And ten posters I believe are adequate for this kind of analysis in each chapter. During my feminist visual semiotic analysis of the posters and the street art, I have looked at them individually in terms of how the images, colors, words, and emotions imbued in a certain poster lead to creation of meaning for the observers. Also, I have used my individual analysis of the posters and pictures of the *Aurat March* to build a comprehensive understanding of the efforts and responses of feminist activists and supporters of the *Aurat March* in face of the socio-economic and political issues, and the marginalization faced by various minority groups in the Pakistani society. My aim is for my analysis of these posters to highlight the ways the *Aurat March* has been as fundamental a force to set the path for Women's movement and for Contemporary activism in Pakistan.

In relation, a visual analysis is helpful in establishing different forms of meaning compared to a literary or linguistic analysis. This is because visual analysis has the potential to create relationships between the object and the subjects based on their subjective and unique experiences owing to sexual and cultural differences. As Amelia Jones mentions in a questionnaire regarding visual studies, the importance of the visual is in the “the very processes through which meaning happens among the maker of the image, the image, and the interpreter” (Jones 191). Thus, with respect to my research I believe that a visual analysis approach is more suitable than a literary approach for the reason that the former will allow for an examination of the cultural representation of sexual differences as well.

The visual analysis approach that I am using in my thesis is the visual semiotic analysis approach of C.S. Peirce, who says that signs consist of three interrelated parts: signs, object, and interpretant (Atkin). I am using a Peircean theory of semiotics because it illustrates a direct relation between signs, objects, and the interpretations we make of them. That is the meanings that are

derived from the signs have a direct physical effect on the interpreters by affecting their lives through representation of the real, lived experiences of people in the posters. According to this theory, signs are representations of meanings in the world, meanings which are changeable, revisable, and make a difference to peoples' lives. For instance, these posters are highlighting the plight of women, religious and ethnic minorities, healthcare workers, low wage manual laborers and differently abled people, showing experiences that are otherwise unrecognized, needs that are unseen, and possibilities for living better that are unconsidered. It helps in grabbing the focus of the viewers or the interpreters and simultaneously making them empathize with them and motivating them to fight for justice for them as well.

Visual Semiotic Analysis is particularly helpful in learning the role of the posters and street art form *Aurat March* in the online and offline space because of the fact that unlike a linguistic or literary analysis which only looks at the verbal meaning, visual semiotic analysis provides a broader understanding of an image by also looking at its analogical and metaphorical meaning (Semetsky 277). Visual Semiotic analysis can then be used to provide nuanced insights into the online and offline context of the *March*. Also, a Feminist Visual Semiotic analysis is important because of the fact that the feminist approach towards visual semiotic analysis “challenges established concepts like subjectivity, identity and/or positionality as essentialist or fixed” (Hurley 788). This is important in terms of dealing with the issue that comes with using semiotic analysis as mentioned by Zoe Hurley in “Arab Women’s Veiled Affordances on Instagram: a Feminist Semiotic Inquiry”, which is the creation of a binary of the researcher and the researched. Also, a feminist visual semiotic analysis allows for expression of meanings of signs that are often suppressed, neglected, or overlooked (Hurley and Hojeij 5), such as different kinds of expressions of women.

I use the triadic model for my visual semiotic analysis that includes the study of the sign, referent (object), and interpretant. I use symbolic, iconic, and indexical signs to draw upon this triadic model of analysis and act as the interpretant in this thesis to reflect on my reactions and understanding of the posters and street art. In simple terms, symbolic signs are abstract and do not have a direct resemblance to the object, iconic signs are culturally recognizable and have resemblance to the object, and indexical signs have a direct resemblance to the object (Kelly 539). The reason for using this model for my analysis is that it elucidates the relationships between the sign, object, and the interpretant in a clear and illustrates the dynamic and interpretative nature of these sign relationships.

Feminist methods hold a sense of distinct epistemological practices that move away from traditional methods of research. In the sense that there is an acknowledgement of going against gender hierarchies, validating the experiences of women, and advocating for the rights and justice of minority groups in society. In relation to that, in “The Wherewithal of Feminist Methods Introduction”, Yasmin Gunaratnam and Carrie Hamilton argue that feminist methods often have a responsibility towards feminist inquiry and research. To put it simply, efforts to make their research and analysis “feminist” in nature must be the goal of feminist methodologies (Gunaratnam and Hamilton 1). Similarly, my research is aligned towards a feminist analysis of the protest movement of *Aurat March* to illustrate the efforts made by people involved in the *March* for the purpose of advocating for social justice and equality in society.

An important assumption that is inherent to feminist methods is the idea that it is transformative and is fundamentally different from methods of other disciplines in the sense that it does not lead to normative assumptions about identity and gender. However, as Dr. Katherine Side explains in “Methods” it is essential that we are critical and reflexive of feminist methods and

their limitations as well. According to Dr. Side, if we ignore the limitations of feminist methods, we will end up not taking in account the risks of these methods, their imitation of normative practices, and their ability to restrict us in terms of the way we look at and analyze our research (Side 62). As a result, even with the approach of feminist methods it is important to be reflexive and critical of the research design and the research process to ensure that people from different social and minority groups are not excluded from the discussion. A feminist approach towards semiotic analysis is therefore essential for the study of cyberactivism and feminist protest as it offers different viewpoints to research. As Patricia Lina Leavy explains in, “The Feminist Practice of Content Analysis” feminist textual analysis is essential because it allows the researchers to be mindful of the power structures of the research process and use the results of the research in a way that enacts change (Leavy 11). As a result, I have used a feminist visual semiotic analysis in my thesis.

Chapter 2: History of Feminism in Pakistan and *Aurat March*

Before engaging with the posters and protest art of the *March*, however, it is crucial to understand the context in which they work, both in terms of the feminist movement in Pakistan and the history of the *Aurat March* itself. Women's groups in Pakistan advocating for the rights and social welfare of women have been present in Pakistan before the realization of a women's movement in the country. For instance, women rights activists and political leaders such as Fatima Ali Jinnah, who was an influential stateswoman and the sister of founder of Pakistan Muhammad Ali Jinnah, played a crucial role in the formation of the All-Pakistan Women's Association (APWA) headed by Liaquat Ali Khan, the first Prime Minister of Pakistan (Batool et al. 212). This association was the first of its kind since the independence of Pakistan in 1947 in terms of contributing to women's welfare in Pakistan. But we see a prominent political focus and formation of a feminist collective in response to the military regime of Zia ul Haq who served as the president of the country since 1978 till 1988.

This is mainly attributed to the horrific discriminatory and extremist policies against women that were brought about during his reign through "Islamization" policies. These policies constituted of discrimination against women using religion as the driving force behind justifying various political measures of Zia's government such as using the *Sharia*⁴ Law to gravely reduce women's judiciary power and introducing gender-discriminatory ordinances such as *Zina Hudoob*⁵ Ordinance that criminalized extra-marital sex, including rape (Imran et al. 134). Consequently, in

⁴ Sharia Law refers to Islamic Law i.e., the immutable values of Islam.

⁵ For detailed information about *Zina Hudoob* ordinance see Imran, Rahat. "Legal injustices: The Zina Hudoob Ordinance of Pakistan and its implications for women." *Journal of International Women's Studies* 7.2 (2005): 78-100.

response to Zia's oppressive regime there was a fundamental rise in the women's movement with a political focus in Pakistan.

In particular, a response to Zia's extremist discriminatory policies using religion as an excuse was the formation of Women's Action Forum (WAF) in 1981, an influential women's rights organization that continued to play an important role in the feminism movement in Pakistan. The forum consisted of elite and educated women who recognized Zia's use of Islam⁶ as a way to subjugate women and advance patriarchy. They fought against Zia's extremist policies and organized several major resistances such as: street agitations, press campaigns, pamphlet warfare, dharna and non-cooperation (Khan 1076). It was through their efforts and persistence at highlighting the unfair treatment of women at the hands of Zia's government and *Hudood* Ordinances that the Senate was pushed towards establishing a Commission of Inquiry for women in 1997. The Commission was helpful in investigating the nature and impact of the laws and policies of Zia's government and recommending a repeal of the law (Mumtaz 65). WAF and its members' efforts to repeal the *Hudood* Ordinances represent one of the first moments where women's groups fought for and were able to achieve political change in Pakistan.

In recent years, feminist movement in Pakistan has had an important role in terms of fighting for women's rights and reforms in legislation and policy. Some examples of legislative reforms pushed forward by the feminist movement include Women Protection Act, the honor killings bill, legislation against acid attacks, banning the virginity or two-finger test (TFT)⁷ for examination of sexual assault survivors in 2021, and securing more seats for women in local governments and the Parliament (Batoool et al. 318). This is why the work of the feminist movement

⁶ Islam is the majority religion in Pakistan.

⁷ For detailed information about the virginity tests in sexual violence cases in Pakistan: Schmall, Emily, and Zia ur-Rehman. "Court in Pakistan Bans 'Virginity Tests' in Sexual Violence Cases." *New York Times (Online)*, 2021.

in Pakistan before *Aurat March* cannot be denied, although *Aurat March* has gained more recognition due to its focus on visibility and its bright, colorful, and provocative protest art.

Protest art has played an important role in political protest in Pakistan historically as well. A prominent example of the use of political protest posters is of Lala Rukh, feminist, and founder of the Women's Action Forum (WAF) who started designing WAF posters to call for freedom and equality (Javaid). One thing that is common in protest posters throughout is that they speak up against injustices and call out for reform. While, as I argue through my research, the difference in the posters from *Aurat March* and what makes them unique is the room for inclusion and diversity for an array of marginalized communities and the ability to tackle a plethora of pertinent socio-political and economic issues through one movement.

Moving towards *Aurat March* which began in 2018, it is the most prominent feminist movement for women's rights activism in Pakistan. It started in 2018 at the time when the #MeToo movement was gaining popularity across the world including Pakistan. It began at the time when sexual assault survivors started taking a stand and calling out their harassers to hold them accountable for their crimes. This involved several high-profile cases in Pakistan such as the CEO of the music company Patari being accused of sexually harassing at least 12 young women, and renowned singer Meesha Shafi going vocal on Twitter about musician Ali Zafar sexually harassing her (Rafi 12). The *Aurat March* though based in the geographical and socio-political context of Pakistan is not an isolated movement but is an example of a transnational feminist activist movement.

Although *Aurat March* started in response to #MeToo movement in Pakistan it had already gained its momentum through specific events within Pakistan that stirred up controversy and a lot of debate amongst Pakistani people. The most prominent one being the murder of Qandeel Baloch,

a popular social media celebrity and activist in Pakistan. Qandeel was famous for her bold social media posts and videos, and she received a lot of hate for them as well, considering the conservative social environment of the country. In 2016 Qandeel was murdered by her brother in her own home in an act of “honor killing” (Saifi et al.). Honor killing⁸ is a very common act of violence in Pakistan which involves the killing of a woman or a young girl by her own family if she disgraces them through immoral or vulgar behavior.

The fact that the *March* started in 2018 and is still gaining momentum is because of similar acts of gender-based and other kinds of violence taking place in Pakistan. For instance, a tragic incident that still has a strong grip on the collective memory of Pakistani people is the brutal murder and beheading of Noor Mukadam. In 2021 Noor was found murdered in an upscale neighborhood in Islamabad in an act of gender-based violence committed by the primary suspect Zahir Jaffar who was also arrested at scene of the crime (Bhatti). The fact that Noor was the daughter of a former diplomat and belonged to an influential family was a further cause of controversy. This was due to the increasing worry that a lot of women had about their own safety as they could see that even someone from an influential family was not safe from such kinds of heinous crimes.

Some other forms of violence that are prevalent in Pakistan and impact the lives of ethnic and religious minorities include: forced conversions, rape, kidnapping and enforced disappearances. I talk about these violence later in my analysis chapters but to give a brief overview, such kinds of violence are used to punish and discipline members of minority communities by often male, conservative, religious (Muslim) men who use their interpretation of Islam and exploit Pakistan’s blasphemy laws as an excuse to enact such acts of violence. In

⁸ Honor Killing is a very complex issue in Pakistan. Find detailed information about honor killings in Pakistan here: Ali, Shoukat, Arfan Latif, and Zubaida Zafar. "Socio-Cultural Determinants of Honor Killing in Pakistan." *Journal of Indian Studies* 6.1 (2020): 25-40.

addition, different groups in Pakistan i.e., Shias, Ahmadis, Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, face discriminations and social marginalization on a daily basis due to their beliefs (International). *Aurat March* has allowed for a representation of these groups in the broader movement for women's rights in Pakistan. This means that people from these and other minority groups can fight alongside other Pakistani people for their rights and speak about the injustices being committed against them.

The first *March* which was held in 2018 in Karachi and was organized in accordance with the International Women's Day celebrations by women rights' activist who were part of a collective that included Women's Action Forum (WAF), Women's Democratic Front (WDF), a socialist feminist organization, and *Hum Aurtein* (We the Women), a women's feminist collective (Chughtai). The focus of the *March* is mainly of socio-political issues inside Pakistan. It gained a lot of popularity across the country which led to more *Marches* taking place in the coming year in other cities in Pakistan. The major ones include Lahore, Islamabad, Quetta, Multan, and in recent years smaller cities such as Bahawalpur, Rawalpindi, and Hyderabad etc. Organizers of the *Marches* and the owners of the social media accounts include not just one feminist women group but various liberal feminists from different professions, and members of different feminist organizations as well. Some of whom remain anonymous for safety reasons and to avoid backlash from the people opposing the *March*.

The posters and street art for *Aurat March* are made by both the organizers and the participants of the *March*, i.e., people who march. They consist of physical posters made on paper and carried during the *March* or posted on the streets. Also, they constitute online posters made by graphic designers and artists published on social media accounts of organizations of *Aurat March* (most of the posters that I have used in my thesis belong to these accounts). People are free

to make their own posters on their social media accounts as well. These posters represent the struggles of a diverse group of people and not just women. And these diverse groups of people such as health care workers, domestic laborers, ethnic and religious minorities, transgender and non-binary people, and differently abled people all come together with their own posters as well. In other words, there are people who come with their own posters to talk about their individual rights and people who follow the theme of the *March* that year and make posters following that theme.

Aurat March started in 2018 but in response to gender-based violences against women but it did not have an overarching theme that year. Similarly in 2019 and 2020, though there were a few posters or slogans that gained a lot of popularity and were associated with the *Marches* of those years, there was no singular theme for the *Marches*. A prominent example of a popular slogan from the *March* of 2019 is *Mera Jism Meri Marzi* “My Body, My Choice”⁹. However, as *Aurat March* has been gaining popularity and more people have been joining the movement the organizers have started introducing an overarching theme for the *March* a little before 8th March (when the *March* usually takes place). For 2021, the theme was “Women’s Health Crisis”, for 2022 it was “Labor Rights and Equal Wages”, and for 2023 it was “Poverty”. It is also important to note that different cities organizing the *March* could have different themes, for example, one of the themes for 2023 was “Feminization of Climate Justice”, but I am looking at the themes that stood out most for the people participating in the *March* and in terms of posters and street art made that year, by focusing on the theme of the year that had most posters and street art.

⁹ I talk about this slogan further in Chapter 3 in relation to Figure 7.

The fact that *Aurat March* does not only cater to women's issues but uses its space to advocate for the rights of people from many diverse minority groups, as apparent by various themes of the *March*, is one of the fundamental reasons behind *Aurat March's* popularity (Dossa). Protest art for *Aurat March* has become a means of representation for different social groups in the community. For instance, sanitation workers were also in focus in protest art for *Aurat March* 2022. *Aurat March* demanded that justice for sanitation workers be delivered in form of better wages and satisfactory work conditions. For this reason, we can see that as a movement *Aurat March* has evolved since its inception to make space for not just women but other groups who are also impacted most by the lack of equity and social justice in our society.

Aurat March receives a lot of support from people and organizations across Pakistan such as women politicians, NGOs, and feminist groups, it receives heavy backlash as well. The opposition to the *March* consists primarily of religious leaders, members of the media, and conservative men who think that the movement of *Aurat March* and its demands constitute of "immoral" and "western" values that will provide harm to Pakistani society which consists of a Muslim Majority (Hussain). For instance, women speaking up about freedom to wear what they want, freedom to walk in a safe public space, or to be adequately compensated for their domestic and often times unpaid labor. These are some demands of the women participating in the *March* that are considered harmful to the patriarchal structures of the community. A lot of the backlash to the *March* is also due to the posters, placards, or banners made by the participants of the *March* that are deemed "vulgar" or "provocative" by majorly men, the media, and some section of women as well. This backlash constitutes of harassment and trolling of participants of the *March* on social media, harassment of participants at the physical *March* itself by hounding the participants and ridiculing them for their beliefs and demands, and in form of threats of physical violence, death,

and rape (Asher). This massive opposition and backlash to the *March* and its participants is what prevents a lot of young girls and women from attending the *Marches*.

For me personally this was a huge deterring factor because I had seen my friends who did attend the *March* get harassed by male reporters about what they were wearing, why they were there, and what did they have to say about the *March* for instance. I was in the middle of my undergraduate degree at a university in Lahore, one of the cities where the *March* is organized every year since 2018, surfing through news channels to look at the coverage of the *March* that year in 2019 when I came across this footage as part of a news channel's broadcast about the *March*. Coming from a relatively conservative Pakistani family where I was not allowed to step outside without an elder or a male relative, and where clothing is a big scrutinizing factor, I was afraid that if I did gather the courage to go out and attend the *March* in face of all the harassment and threats, I would be filmed by reporters and my face would be plastered online or on social media in the countless pictures of *Aurat March* that circulate online. In light of this, I decided that a safer way for me to contribute to the movement is to take part in it online in the form of spreading information about it on social media, or sharing images of posters from the *March*, and sharing my friends' social media posts and stories from the *March*.

The posters or placards of the *March* are so important to me for a twofold reason. A way for me to participate was to help make physical posters for the *March* itself and making the posters was such a meaningful and wholesome experience. Every year before the day of the *March* a group of girls and sometimes a few boys would gather in the courtyard of one of the academic buildings on campus, and since I lived on campus it was easier for me to participate. People would bring colorful markers, paints, crayons, play some music and we would all work on making the posters together. Also, even while being home looking at the posters circulating online on social media

would make me feel like I was a part of this movement too because the posters displayed my thoughts and concerns as well. Although it was not me who made the poster or me holding the placard but there were several brave women out there participating in the *March* who were raising their voices for the issues that I wanted to talk about or the kinds of freedoms that I was hoping for we could achieve in our society.



Figure a: "Posters from Aurat March on the streets of Lahore." 22 February. 2020, @auratmarchlahore.



Figure b: "Protesters carrying Aurat March posters." 19 February. 2022, @WAF Lahore (twitter).

Chapter 3: Gender Based Violence

Gender based violence is inflicted on women as a way of policing and forcing them to mold themselves into the traditional patriarchal and heteronormative structures of the Pakistani society (Hadi 2006). This includes but is not limited to sexual assault and rape, intimate partner violence, child sexual assault or female genital mutilation, and honor killings. Posters from the *Aurat March* are an attempt to elucidate the pervasive nature of the different kinds of gender-based violence in the community and to highlight how this violence also serves as a tool to limit women's growth and prosperity in a largely men-oriented society. They do this by giving a visceral description of the violence, by illustrating how this violence threatens the lives of these people, and how we need to put an end to it.

To begin with, my semiotic analysis is going to be threefold: symbolic, iconic, and indexical in that order. I am looking at the three different signs individually and then describing how they work together to send a certain message to the viewers. The image in Figure 1 shows a woman and several hands grabbing her and covering her mouth, to stop her from speaking up. For the symbolic signs from the poster in Figure 1 the bold red color that covers the majority of the poster is symbolic of blood because it is a thick dark red, not a wash or a bright red. It represents the blood that is spilled in the various acts of gender based and intimate

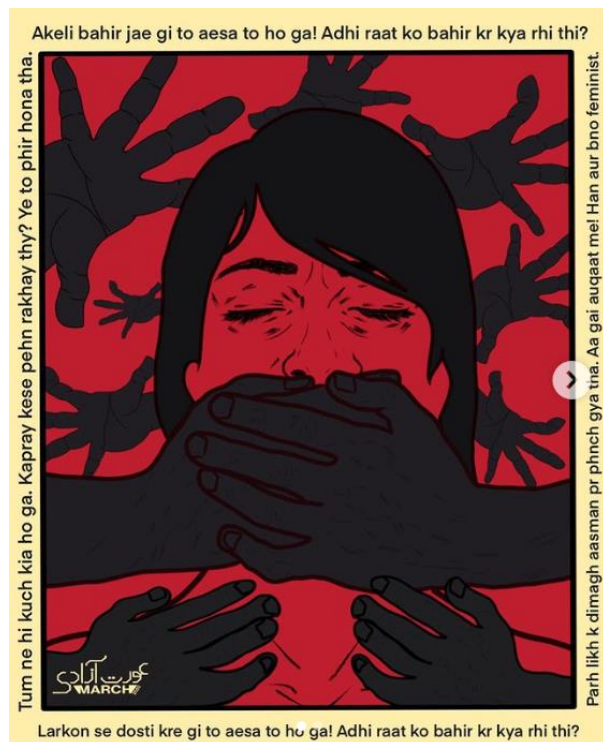


Figure 1: "Poster about sexual violence produced for *Aurat March*." 25 February, 2020, @auratazadimarch.

partner violence that are perpetrated each year in Pakistan. Secondly, in terms of the iconic signs, images of black hands which appear to be reaching out from the poster and are also covering the mouth of the woman in the poster represent the barriers against reporting and speaking against crimes of sexual assault and rape. She is literally unable to speak amidst these hands that hold her down, hold her silent, and surround her. Different kinds of religious, societal, and cultural pressures stop the women at every step from seeking help. Also, the micro expressions on the face of the woman in the poster such as the furrowed eyebrows and closed eyes represent that distress and the helplessness in an environment that blames the victims.

Lastly, indexically the poster consists of text in the borders of the poster which represents some of the examples of victim blaming and of justifying the actions of the perpetrators of sexual assault and of rapists (Tariq). These parts of the image both lead the viewer's eye to specific points of meaning but also lead viewers to consider examples in the world outside the image. Not only does the light-yellow border frame the central symbolic image, drawing viewers to the image by the contrast of light and dark, but it also highlights the messages written in small dark colors in that lighter frame which show different phrases used to blame victims and suggest that the abuse would not have happened if the woman had not wanted it. "You must have done something. What kind of clothes were you wearing? This was definitely going to happen". "This happened because you went out by yourself. What were you doing outside late at night?". "You thought highly of yourself because you studied a little. Now you are back to your roots, say that you are a feminist now". "If you become friends with men, this is exactly what would happen, what were you doing outside at night?". The light frame entraps the woman again in the image, so that she is not only held down in a physical metaphor by hands, but also by the words of blame.

Collectively, the three different signs depict a case of sexual assault and show the kinds of victim blaming narratives that are perpetuated when a victim confides about their trauma. The poster thus highlights to the viewers the suffering of the victims as evident by the woman in poster and the different kinds of barriers that victims of sexual assault face when they reach out for help while trying to get justice against their oppressor.

Another example of the way these posters represent critically sexual assault and the subsequent victim blaming is in Figure 2, which foregrounds, though in a different way, a bold red



Figure 2: “Poster about sexual violence produced for *Aurat March*.”6 March. 2020, @auratazadimarch.

color. The image in Figure 2 displays a woman with one hand covering her face and with the other hand on her head, in a look of despair. There is a slogan in the top right corner, red text on her exposed skin, and grey text with repetitive words in the background. As symbolic signs, the red color of the text on the exposed skin of the woman in the poster denote acts of violence committed against women. It looks like blood, or scars or

wounds of some kind. As further iconic signs, the way the woman in the poster has her eyes

closed and a hand over her mouth is an indication of the manner in which women in society are forced to close their eyes against the injustices that they witness and their mouths from speaking up against their perpetrators and the violence they commit. She appears to hold herself protectively against some oncoming violence, while also mourning or lamenting its imminence. Part of the force of the representation is in its evocative representation of what enduring gender-based

violence is like, communicating to viewers the lived experience that underscores the reality of violence.

Also, the indexical signs in the poster are present in the form of the repetitive text in the background in light grey that reads: *Meri Marzi* which translates in English to “My Choice”, and the slogan in white: *Mera Jism Kis Ki Marzi?* “My Body, Whose Choice?”. The slogan is closest to the viewer, and hints at the importance of this question for the victims of violence as they are fighting for bodily autonomy and safety for themselves. Also, the slogan for this poster relates to the popular slogan for the *Aurat March 2019: Mera Jism, Meri Marzi* “My Body, My Choice”. This slogan gained a lot of controversy in 2019 due to its negative perceptions by conservative people and religious leaders who used this slogan to claim that women just want an excuse for being immoral or wearing culturally inappropriate clothing. This puts an emphasis on women’s struggles and lack of bodily autonomy, as just asking for the rights to your own body can become a cause of controversy and debate. Lastly, the text on the exposed skin on the arms and face of the women names male relations of the woman, such as “father, uncle, brother, and husband”. The point of the wording overlaying the imagery could be that women have less control of their bodies as compared to the men in their families and in society

Reading the posters semiotically helps to parse out the ways they represent lived experiences of sexual assault with a particular focus on its connection to women’s lack of bodily autonomy. By indexically bringing in the male relations of the woman in the poster and enunciating her inability to speak or up or stop the incoming threat of violence, we see that the poster is trying to inform people’s views about giving women the right to their bodies. This is in terms of saying no to someone’s advances without worrying about physical or sexual harm, promoting lawmaking and policies about women’s safety, and granting them their rightful decision-making power.

In the image in Figure 3 we see a woman in the centre and several hands reaching out to her, such as on top of her head, her back, and her shoulders, as a sign of support. We see a face of a woman which is symbolically entirely different from other women in relation to accounts of sexual violence. That is, she appears to be confident, content, and self-aware because she sits or stands firmly where she is, facing the viewer squarely and returning the viewer's gaze directly. She is in control of how we see her, making us engage with her somehow. Just from her self-composed and focused facial expressions while being handled by masculine hands, we are

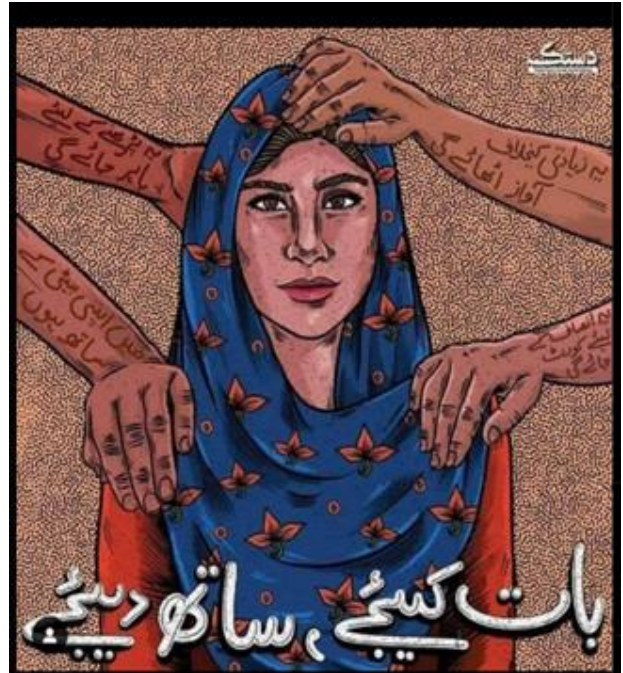


Figure 3: "Poster about women empowerment produced for Aurat March." 6 March. 2020, @auratmarchquetta.

led to think that she is aware of the dangers present in society but feels safe in the knowledge that she is not alone in the face of the patriarchal violence and control perhaps due to the support of her family and other people in her life. This is because the masculine hands iconically in Figure 3 are gentle, rounded, even soft hands that are patting the woman's head, present on each of her shoulders, and holding her back, all of which represent the support that the people around this woman are offering. The hands indicate masculine relations who are declaring (in their supportive gentleness) that they will stand by her against the different kinds of gender-based violence and will not let it impede her from getting her rightful education and freedom.

Indexically, in Figure 3 there is text in the poster that is asking both for support from different members of the society and for others to stand in solidarity with the women fighting for

their rights in this country. The white bold text at the bottom says: *Baat Ki Jiey, Saath Di Jiey* “Talk, Stand in Solidarity”, encouraging audiences and allies to speak out about abuse, to believe women and stand with them. While the brown text on the arms surrounding the woman in the poster reads: “she will speak up against injustice”, “she will go to court for justice”, “she will go out for her education”, and “I stand with my daughter” respectively. This poster urges viewers to take a stand against domestic and gender based physical and sexual violence. It emphasizes the need for viewers to recognize the suffering faced by women and help them in getting their basic human rights such as a good quality education and a safe public space. Also, it clearly shows the difference suitable support can make to a person in their efforts of fighting for justice and standing up for themselves.

Figure 4 represents a more disturbing case of sexual assault. The image in Figure 4 presents a young woman with a horrified expression. There are several eyes with either judgmental or fearful expressions surrounding the young woman. And there are a couple of hands attacking and harming her body with spikes. There are social media handles on the bottom left of the poster and a logo in the bottom right. Symbolically, the chapped lips, sunken cheeks and eyes, the blue pallor of the young girl are signs which give her the semblance of a corpse. It indicates referentially that she dies after suffering from sexual violence. This death could be a physical death from the injuries sustained during the violent act, or a spiritual death caused by the shame imposed on the girl by the society which holds sexual assault victims accountable rather than the perpetrators themselves, seen particularly in the diminutizing perspective from above that makes her look smaller. In either case, she is not presented as someone who has survived the assault because her wide-eyed, ghostly grey terror is clear. The trauma of her death is on display, made overt.

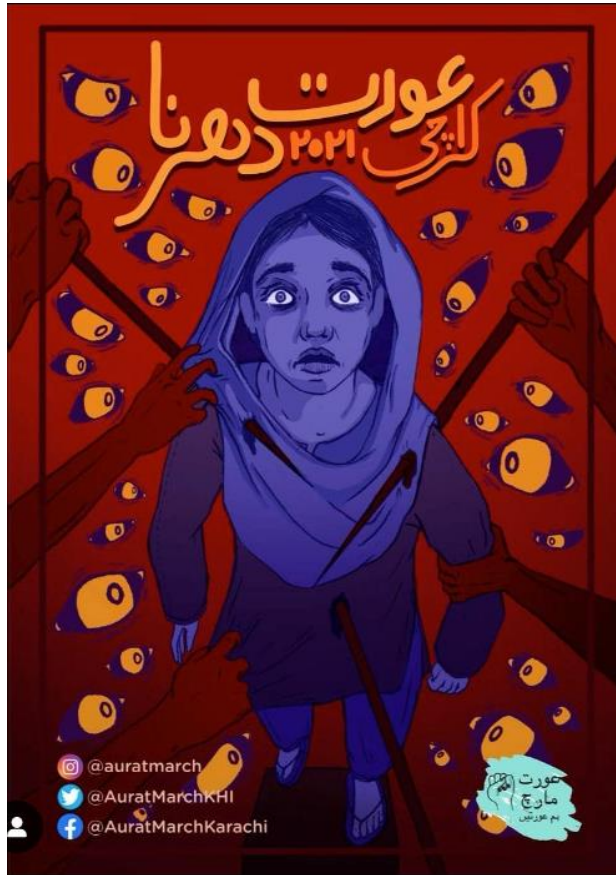


Figure 4: "Poster about patriarchal violence produced for *Aurat March*." 24 February, 2021, @auratmarch.

The spectacle-nature of her suffering is supported by the way she appears to be raised in an elevated position and centered by the hands and sticks holding her in place that still also look down on her, precisely like a spectacle to be observed. This is alluding to the stories that are spun at the expense of the young girl and her suffering, as people try to find ways to impose their own understanding about why such a horrendous act would have taken place.

For instance, whenever the public hears of such a horrific instance occurring, rather than trying to find a way to punish the perpetrator, the majority population is more focused on

trying to find reasons for victim blaming by talking about what clothes the victim was wearing, the time at which the incident happened, whether she was by herself or not etc. The victim of the violence loses not only bodily autonomy but autonomy over their narrative as well. And the red color, the color of violence and blood, is again present in this poster.

We can see her bodily autonomy is lost in addition because in Figure 4 iconically the numerous eyes blanketing the young girl in the poster have different kinds of expressions ranging from anger, shock, horror, and indifference. These eyes bear a semblance of the kinds of reactions that people have when they learn about a certain incident of gender-based violence (Khan). For instance, some people blame the victims, some try to justify the actions of the perpetrators of

sexual assault or rapists, some take it as a given in a country with high rates of gender-based violence, while there are some who are horrified for their own safety. Also, the expressions of the young girl show an amalgam of fear, disbelief, helplessness, and a cry for help. It appears that she is imploring the viewer for help, amidst the disbelief, blame or fear of the other eyes around her. The large brightness of her own eyes, contrasted with the pallor of her own skin, puts her imploring eyes in contrast with both the unsupportive eyes around her and, possibly, in communication with our own eyes who can see her and her context altogether.

Indexically and symbolically, signs in Figure 4 indicate a very graphic representation of acts of gender-based violence and what happens to people who experience it. It shows a small young girl, and various manly hands that are trying to rip her clothes and headscarf off. They are stabbing different parts of her body with spikes, acts of physical penetration which can only hurt and ultimately kill her. As a result, this poster is about the impact of and the urgency to end sexual and physical acts of violence. Also, in terms of indexical signs the top of the poster reads: *Aurat Dharna Karachi 2021*, “Aurat March Karachi 2021”, telling us the time and location of the *March*. The fact that the information about the *March* is the only text on the poster highlights how powerful the image in this poster is. The different social media handles i.e., Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook at the bottom left of the poster illustrate the association of the poster with the *Aurat March*. The poster also has the logo of one of *Aurat March*’s social media accounts @auratmarch illustrating the fact that it was published on that account¹⁰. As a whole, this poster semiotically highlights in different ways how horrific such an incident can be for the victim and as a result

¹⁰ The light blue circular logo which consists of a fist and the words *Aurat March (Hum Aurtein)* “Aurat March (Us Women)” is the logo of one of the biggest social media accounts of *Aurat March* (@auratmarch on Instagram). Most posters from that account have the same logo. I do not mention this in the analysis of each individual poster because it is repetitive.

urges the viewers to fight for the rights of the victims and young girls to avoid future victims of this heinous crime. The violence inflicted on the victims is shown in a very visceral manner and so is the fear of the victims, alerting viewers of the severity of these kinds of violences.

The image in Figure 5 includes a woman with four different hands attempting to cover her mouth and grasp her throat in a gesture that appears threatening. There is text on the top of the poster above the woman's head and there is text on the four arms in the poster. Figure 5 is another example of cases of sexual assault or rape and the victim blaming that comes after it.



Figure 5: "Poster about Gender-based Violence produced for *Aurat March*." 6 March. 2020, @auratmarchquetta.

Symbolically, the expression of the woman in the poster represents a sense of

determination and strength. The determination to fight societal injustices against this violence that is usually done to women, comes from an aura of strength her gaze gives us, communicating that we should not back down from protecting women and their rights, such as in the face of false accusations, and societal pressures. Even dealing with several hands silencing and holding her down, her gaze remains steadfast and strong. Her expression is not of someone who looks beaten down due to her circumstances rather of someone who is ready to fight for justice and in return is imploring – even challenging – the viewers to do the same. Also, the traditionally appropriate clothing i.e., *shalwar kameez* that the woman in this poster is wearing could illustrate that there is

no connection between a person's clothing and the likelihood of getting sexually assaulted or raped. Not only is she an ordinary or typical woman, but her inconspicuous clothing has no role in the violence to which she is susceptible.

There are a couple of hands that are either trying to stop the woman in the poster from speaking and withholding her voice or presenting a threat to her life by showing their ability to suffocate her, a common theme amongst the posters about gender-based violence in this chapter. Iconically, these hands refer to the forever present danger to the lives of women and victims of sexual violence or assault who build up the courage to speak up against their perpetrators. Also, they illustrate the attempts of different members of communities to rob women of their voices and their right to ask for justice and accountability. The varying skin tones of the hands tells us that it is not just one specific class or social group that is responsible for the violence that the woman in the poster is subjected to; rather different social or ethnic groups are involved. The fact that this pressure and opposition is not just from a few but several members or groups within the Pakistani society is an indication of the vast disadvantages that survivors of gender-based violence have in terms of fighting for justice for themselves.

Indexical signs in Figure 5 are the bold white text on the top right and the top left corner of the poster, which reads *Rawaj Badliay, Samaj Badliay* "Change your attitude, Change the Society", pointing to the fact this is a wide social issue and that there needs to be a change in societal attitudes. The smaller text written on the arms reads: *Log Kia Kahaen Gae?* "What will people say?", *Tum Hi Nae Kuch Kia Hoga* "You must have done something", *Kia Tmhare Paas Koi Saboot Hae?* "Do you have any evidence?", and *Tum akeli bahir kia kar rahi thi?* "What were you doing outside alone?". These represent some of the allegations members of the community continue to make against the survivors of sexual assault and rape. They reflect the thinking and

attitude of the majority community members who make it difficult for survivors of sexual violence to speak up (Kazmi et al.). Consequently, most survivors of assaults are likely to not tell anyone about their experience and even if they do, they are likely to be shunned by society due to victim blaming.

Hence, this poster brings light to the fact that there is a need in our society for a change in the way such crimes are viewed, and it does this by depicting different forms of victim blaming made against survivors of sexual assault and rape, focusing viewer attention on the determined expression of the woman in the poster, and highlighting the messages to change societal views. Rather than blaming the victim for somehow being responsible for being a target, the narrative should be changed towards bringing the rapists and the assailants under scrutiny.

The image in Figure 6.1 consists of various *kameez*¹¹ hanging on four rows of thin ropes. The *kameez* appear to have Urdu words written on them in red or black. Figure 6.1 and 6.2¹² show a Feminist Protest Art installation in the city of Lahore for the *Aurat March* 2021; it consisted of slogans on shirts that were messages from young girls and women regarding their age and their clothing when they were first sexually assaulted, assaulted based on their gender, emotionally abused, physically abused, neglected, and/or harassed. The hanging of a piece of the survivor's clothing is symbolic not only of sexual assault but iconically evokes strong emotions of anger and terror in the viewers and the protestants of the *March*. It alludes to the gruesome act of rape and represents the deeply prevalent nature of gender-based violence in our society. Since it is considered a taboo to talk about sexual assault or rape, the hanging of the shirts sends a strong message about how many people are affected, in a way that prevents audiences from averting their

¹¹ Traditional Pakistani clothing. It is basically a long shirt.

¹² Figure 6.1 and 6.2 are not from official social media pages of the *Aurat March* but I have included them because they represent a crucial art installation for the *March*.

eyes from the dreadful reality. Similar art installations highlighting violences and injustices against vulnerable communities such as young girls, for instance, have also been carried out in other countries across the world. The Red Dress Project is one such example of art installations in Canada where dresses are used to call out violence against missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls and two-spirit people (Gwiazda). It shows that regardless of geographical location or cultural values, violence against young women and girls is a crucial gender-based issue that needs to be addressed.

In relation to the iconic signs that point to the people in society who are affected by what the clothes represent, the articles of clothing displayed in the Feminist Art Installation are almost all the *kameez*/long shirt which is a traditional item of clothing in Pakistan. Symbolically, this tears away the false claim that women will be safe if they dress in a certain way that would be considered



Figure 6.1:Ahmed, R Umaima. “Street art installation produced for *Aurat March*.” 2021, *Global Voices.org*.

culturally appropriate. This refers to the false accusations and character shaming against the survivors of sexual assault which includes blaming them for the outfits they were wearing, their location and their behavior at the time of the assault.

The hanging shirts are covered in slogans written in bright and bold colors, leading us to recognize the larger social narrative of victim blaming the installation indexically points to. For

instance, the image in 6.2 shows a close up of one of the *kameez* from the art installation depicted in Figure 6.1. The *kameez* reads: *Kia in kapron ka kasoor tha?* “Were these clothes to blame?”, it is a clear rebuttal to victim blaming narrative and gaslighting of the survivors of gender-based violence. It refers to the fact that victims of sexual violence are not limited to a specific kind of clothing for the reason that even people wearing the most modest and culturally appropriate clothing are found to be the survivors of sexual assault crimes.

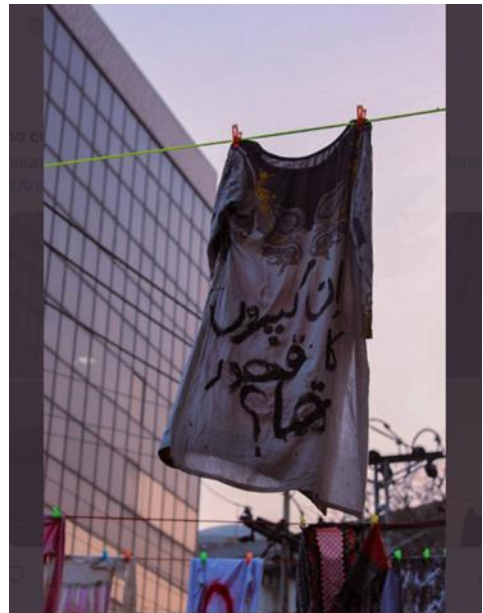


Figure 6.2 “Street Art produced for *Aurat March*.” 2021, *Twitter*.

As a result, the different semiotic signs of Figure 6.1 and 6.2 illustrate that clothing of a victim is irrelevant in face of crimes of sexual assault. This figure then clearly shifts the blame from the victims and their circumstances surrounding the assault, towards the perpetrators to put the responsibility of the crime on them entirely. In these different ways, the installation urges the viewers to hold the perpetrators accountable for their crimes.

Another form of violence depicted in the *Aurat March* posters is female genital mutilation, a common cause of violence against young girls that is depicted in Figure 7¹³. Figure 7 consists of a muted pink object on a black background. The object is being cut by a knife. The muted pink image in the poster appears to resemble a flower relating to the symbolism of female genitalia as

¹³ Figure 7 is also not from an official *Aurat March* page but from an Instagram account of a popular feminist graphic designer. I have included it because of the significance and severity of the issue being brought up in the poster.

a flower, or a fruit based on the fact that they are considered “domestic” and “decorative” (Arnold 28). The iconic knife slicing through the flower and the pink substance that is seeping through due to the cutting represents the bloody act of female genital mutilation. The blood that is smeared on the knife and the limp severed part of the flower which is covered in blood also evocatively show how painful and gruesome this act is, simultaneously showing the kind of irreversible emotional and physical pain this causes to the victims.

Considering the poster indexically, the title comes from the 2019 *Aurat March* collection titled *Mera Jism Meri Marzi* “My Body My Choice”, by popular Pakistani feminist illustrator Shehzil Malik and refers to freedom from feminine genital mutilation (FGM). FGM is done to young girls and is child sexual assault which occurs all around the world regardless of religious backgrounds or geographical location. The slogan “My Body My Choice” is popular in the *March* with reference to women’s fight for bodily autonomy. In relation to FGM this slogan urges for



Figure 7: “Poster about Female Genital Mutilation produced for *Aurat March*.” 12 November. 2019, @shehzilm.

bodily autonomy for young girls. Altogether, this poster is a call to end FGM and similar kinds of gender-based violence against young children using religion or culture as an excuse (Syed 1). The flower symbol represents not only female genitalia, but youth, in its bloom, thereby enunciating the need for bodily autonomy for young girls and children who might not yet be aware of their rights, understand the implications of such kinds of violences, or have the capability to fight for themselves. In this way, the

poster sends a physically suggestive message about the need to protect people from the gruesome harms of FGM.

Figure 8 contains an image of sandals and a hashtag at the bottom. The image of a pair of sandals – the *Peshawari chappals* that are popular, traditional sandals for women in Pakistan – refers symbolically to the lack of freedom that women have in terms of their impeded mobility and their safety while walking by themselves. There are two main reasons for this. First, due to Pakistan’s patriarchal cultural norms, women are not allowed to walk outside of the house by themselves. Instead, they are to be

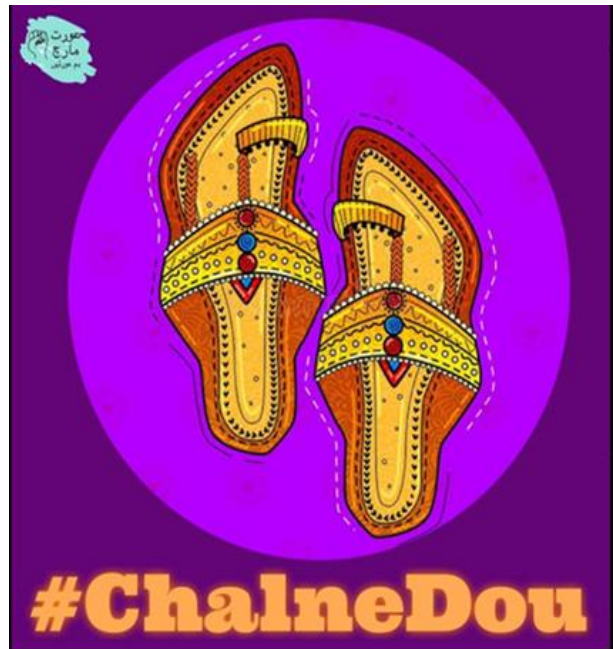


Figure 8: “Poster about safe public spaces for women produced for *Aurat March*.” 16 February. 2021, @auratmarch.

accompanied by a male relative or guardian. Second, if they are able socially to walk outside of the house, they have to suffer through catcalls, sexual harassment, the male gaze that decenters their own experiences, and potential physical and gender-based violence. Hence, the image of the chappals alludes to the lack of mobility for women in Pakistan. And underscoring this is the bright purple color in the center of the poster that focuses like a theatrical spotlighting the shoes, in contrast with the darker purple color outside the circle; it is an indication of the surveillance that women experience when they step outside their homes, since it is not considered as culturally appropriate for a woman to be outside by herself.

Iconically, the hashtag in bright orange: #ChalneDou “#Let me Walk” brings attention to women’s fight for the right of mobility and safe public spaces. Lastly, in terms of the indexical

signs the logo of *Aurat March* at the top left corner of the poster highlights the poster’s association with the movement of *Aurat March*. Through three different modes of semiotic signs, this poster depicts the dangers that women face in the public sphere, reflecting on the need for safe walking spaces for women.



Figure 9: Poster about domestic violence produced for *Aurat March*.” 25 February. 2021, @auratmarch.

In Figure 9 there is an image of a woman hiding her face with her hands and an arm with an enclosed fist. There is text in the image and a logo on the top right corner. In Figure 9, the woman is seen covering and trying to protect her face from an incoming threat. We can deduce that this is a representation of domestic violence because of the sentence at the top which implies that the woman in the poster is married, and the fist belongs to her husband. This poster uses

perspective to put the threat of violence in the foreground, in the face of viewers themselves, to experience the same feeling of threat clearly felt by the woman. In terms of an iconic reading of the signs in the poster, there is a text box in the middle right of the poster that reads: *Shaadi Kay Baad Who Sahi Ho Jaye Ga* “He will get better after marriage”. This hints at the common occurrence in Pakistani community where violent attitudes of men are ignored by assuming that they will stop being violent after they are married. This is one of the reasons behind high rates of gender-based domestic violence in Pakistan. Another indexical sign is the logo of *Aurat March* on the top right of the poster which shows the relation of the poster to the movement. And the tagline

at the bottom right: Patriarchal violence in home and communities, further adds to the fact that this poster is an attempt to fight against domestic violence. The different semiotic signs of Figure 9 come together to dismantle a societal belief¹⁴ that wives are responsible for fixing their husbands' violent tendencies. It also shows that married women and girls are more susceptible to this kind of abuse and, in addition to not being safe in their public spaces, they are not safe in their own homes.

Figure 9 relates to the domestic violence focused on in Figure 10. Figure 10 displays a woman with a noticeable bruise on her face hiding behind a door. There are tears falling out of her eyes. Figure 10 contains text and a logo as well. The symbolic signs of the bruise on the woman's face are a clear representation of domestic violence, and representative of further expected assaults. And the way that the woman is hiding behind the dark blue door refers to how domestic violence is a taboo topic in our community, where victims are often discouraged from speaking out against their perpetrator as it is considered something that should be kept behind closed door. The focus is not on her mouth, which is hidden; it is on her bruise, the tears falling from her eyes, and her dejected expression which compound to illustrate her helplessness.

The iconic signs of the text box on the middle-left reads: *Kismet apni apni.../* "Everyone's own destiny...". It refers to how



Figure 10: Poster about domestic violence produced for Aurat March." 25 February. 2021, @auratmarch.

¹⁴ I could not find relevant literature providing support to the claim that men not being violent after marriage is a common belief in Pakistan. But this is something I have heard consistently growing up myself, as a tacit truth about marriage, so I have kept this claim there in the analysis of Figure 9.

crimes of domestic violence in the household and the community are often ignored because people do not want to interfere in someone's private life. Instead, people are socially expected to believe that such matters are not unusual within the household (Zahid). Such an understanding of how domestic violence should be dealt with is partly responsible for the aggravation of the violence in the community, as it gives free reign to the perpetrators to act whichever way they want. This is particularly the case since the perpetrators of such violences are often also the head of the household or someone with authority or decision-making power in the house. The poster puts viewers outside the doorframe, as someone this woman is also fearful of, perhaps responsible for the violence in similar ways to the perpetrators and the communities that ignore it.

In the end, the poster again points indexically to the *Aurat March* with the logo on the top right of the poster, showing the relation of the poster to the movement. And the same tagline at the bottom right: Patriarchal violence in home and communities¹⁵, illustrates that this poster is also about gender based domestic violence in our country. To sum it up, Figure 10 brings attention to the fact that domestic violence is a real issue in the Pakistani community and not something that needs to be ignored and treated as a private matter. It encourages the viewers to talk about this issue rather than ignoring that it exists or sweeping it under the rug for sake of appearances.

In conclusion, the posters and art installations for gender-based violence in the *Aurat March* depict the different kinds of violences committed against people based on their gender identity, primarily women. Some of the examples of these violences are sexual assault and rape, domestic violence, marital rape, child sexual assault, and female genital mutilation. These posters illustrate the narratives of victim-blaming that further harm the survivors of such

¹⁵ Figures 9 and 10 are part of the same social media post on the @auratmarch account on Instagram, which talks about patriarchal violence.

violences and that prevent them from obtaining the justice they deserve, by removing accountability from the shoulders of the perpetrators. Thus, with the help of these posters, viewers are able to better understand the suffering of victims of gender-based violence, the kinds of people affected, the ways everyone involved is silenced, the obstacles preventing survivors from getting justice, and the need for safer public and household spaces for women.

And what the visual semiotic analysis does here that just a literary or a visual analysis would fail to do is that it connects the interpretants to the suffering of the women in the posters through detailed and visceral depictions of different kinds of gender-based violences. Some of the posters in this chapter are clear representations of the act of violence, some show consequences of the violence inflicted, while others display the different directions that can be taken in our response towards the survivors of gender-based violence. There are also images which speak up against victim blaming and attempt to take control of the narrative. This goes back to the Peircean theory of semiotics which links signs to its interpretants and whereby the interpretation of signs has direct impact on the lives of interpretants. Rather than just telling the readers about the atrocities being committed it also shows them the nature of the atrocities and calls them out for their inaction or for giving into societal attitudes that are responsible for these violences to go unnoticed.

This analysis explores further the different societal attitudes towards survivors of domestic violence by highlighting the reasons behind these attitudes and social behaviors i.e., cultural norms, religious values, and lack of knowledge or awareness about the proper resources to respond to gender-based violence for instance. In the end, it is not that the information in these posters or the topic being discussed has not been brought up before in Pakistan but rather that it has not been discussed in this detail and gotten such strong reactions as in previous movements or other protests

that has in *Aurat March* (Sethi). And a visual semiotic analysis of the posters helps in putting all of this information in perspective by foregrounding it altogether through the images and the text.

Chapter 4: Women's Labor

In this chapter, I am looking at women's labor in terms of the adverse working conditions faced by women in domestic labor, healthcare workers, and low wage jobs in the informal economy. The difficulties that they often face due to patriarchal societal norms discourage these women from stepping outside the household to earn a living and gaining some amount of social and financial independence and are primary reasons why women workers do not have the necessary support for their work. Posters related to women's labor also consider the inequitable gender wage gap and the unsafe working conditions for women healthcare workers frontline and in the community.

The image in Figure 11 contains a group of people with their arms raised in a manner of protest. Some people are holding objects and one of them is holding a banner with text on it. Symbolically, signs of Figure 11 are the use of bold red and black colors to represent the people who are protesting, a color combination that creates a sense of gravity with respect to the issue of unpaid women's labor. These colors are stark, impactful in their simplicity, and serious colors. Red also symbolizes change, violence, and urgency as seen by the posters for gender-

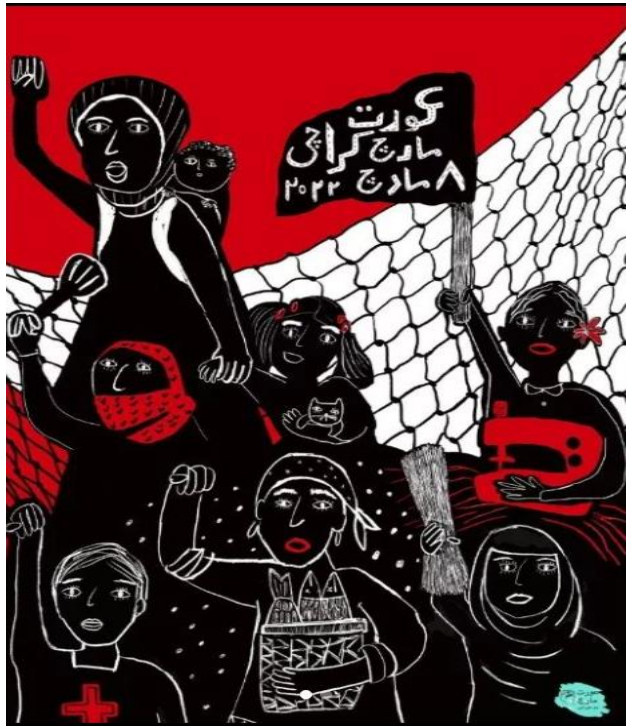


Figure 11: "Poster about Women's Labor produced for *Aurat March*." 6 February, 2022, @auratmarch.

based violence in chapter 3 which use red color to show different kind of violences committed against women. There is a black and white net that is seen to be engulfing the protestors from

behind, which could be a depiction of the far-reaching, debilitating consequences of women's unpaid labor. The protesters seem to be between the net that restrains their freedom of movement from the red background into the white space.

The items held by each protestor in the poster represent a field of work. For instance, from left to right, the person holding a sewing machine represents the labor of tailors, the person holding a broom constitutes the labor of housekeepers, the person holding the hand of a young child and carrying another one their back acts for the unpaid labor of housewives. Similarly, the person holding a cooking utensil/spatula is an indication of the domestic workers, the person holding a basket of fish stands for the fishers' community, and lastly, the person with a cross on their clothes is a depiction of the community of Christian workers in Pakistan who are grossly underpaid and undervalued for their work.

The line drawing style which presents the people on the poster can be read iconically to show that despite their different fields, they are part of one united front; the group is represented unindividuated in its detail, connected as parts of the black space that are differentiated by the white lines and dots. Their connection as unified in the mass of black color shows the coalitional nature of the *March*. That is, different people come together for the same purpose, namely, to fight for their rights. While they may belong to different social groups, as a part of the *March* they are united in the fight for their rights.

Considering the poster indexically, the banner held by one of the protestors contains the following text: *Aurat March Karachi, 8th March, 2022* "Women's March 8th March 2022". This information is presented for the purpose of spreading knowledge about the place and time of the *March* and to gather support for the cause of the protest; any worker can find themselves represented in the line drawings, emphasizing the solidarity of purpose. As a result, Figure 11

brings attention to the unfavorable circumstances of low-wage laborers and unpaid domestic workers. It highlights the efforts being made by these groups to fight for their rights for a better income and security. And it informs the viewers about discrimination against workers from religious minorities.



Figure 12: “Poster about domestic labor produced for Aurat March.” 2 March. 2022, @auratmarch.

In Figure 12, the image shows torso of a woman stirring a pot in a set up that resembles that of a kitchen counter. There are small containers and recipe books laid out on the counter, a logo on the top left corner and a hashtag on the right side of the poster. The symbolic signs of Figure 12 start with the words “please” and “sorry”, encircling the neck of the woman in the poster as a reference to the subservient nature of the life led by full-time housewives. Again, we see the use of dark and bold colors that simultaneously

represent the intensity of the issue and the bleak atmosphere that fulltime housewives find themselves to be in. For instance, the images of the brain being stirred in a pot and the dark liquid spilling from a pot labeled energy subsequently allude to how women who have to do the 24-hour unpaid labor of being a housewife feel as their mental, emotional, and physical energy is being drained off. Her brain is being cooked in a vat; her energy is drained. The red exclamation sign on a white rectangular background builds emphasis for the discussion of this issue.

The recipes spread out in foreground of the poster and the domestic kitchen or cooking set up are iconic of the everyday life of most housewives. Small pots subsequently labeled empathy, compassion, guilt, and forgiveness speak to two issues. First, they represent the need of full-time housewives for that empathy and compassion in their unpaid labor. Secondly, they illustrate both the guilt that the housewives themselves feel as they are forced to repetitively forgive the unfair treatment they are being dealt with, and the guilt they feel when/if they find the courage to speak up against the injustice of their unpaid labor. The ingredients of their worlds consist of these four items, in various recipes, quantities, and combinations.

We can read both symbolically and indexically the recipes and notes from left to right on the yellow sheets of paper. These reference “the emotional labor” performed by full-time housewives in terms of their feelings of guilt – both to themselves for putting up with this labor and to others for not enjoying it as much as society expects. They hint at the forgiveness that stay-at-home wives often feel for their family when trying to raise their voices against the unfair treatment that they face on a daily basis, and then reflexively for themselves when they can’t put a voice to those feelings. That is the uncertainty and confusion experienced when they have to “debate their own oppression” in the process of trying to justify it and come to terms with it because they are not able socially to envision an alternate reality of their lives. The yellow recipe book reads: *#HamariMehnat* “Our hard work” and *HamaraHaq* “Our Right”, in reference to their right of being treated fairly for the work that they do. And the hashtag *#24 Ghantay ki Kahani* “#Story of 24 hours” stands for the twenty-four hours of unpaid labor and the emotional labor that is inherent to the role of a full-time housewife in Pakistani society.

Therefore, looking at the meanings in Figure 12 by analyzing it in the threefold terms of signification brings our focus to the complexity of the plight of full-time housewives who are

involved in twenty-four hours of domestic labor but are not paid, or acknowledged for their services. This poster then pushes the viewers to acknowledge the hard work of unpaid domestic labor and calls for empathy and appreciation towards housewives.

In Figure 13, there is a woman holding her hands up for the viewers to see. There is text on the bottom and top right corner of the poster, along with a logo in the top left corner. If we look at the symbolic signs of the Figure 13, the woman in the poster has red puffy eyes indicating that she has been shedding tears. Also, her face appears to be haggard and weary, presumably from all the taxing labor that she has been doing and has been getting underpaid for. In terms of the iconic signs present in the poster, the image of hands of the domestic

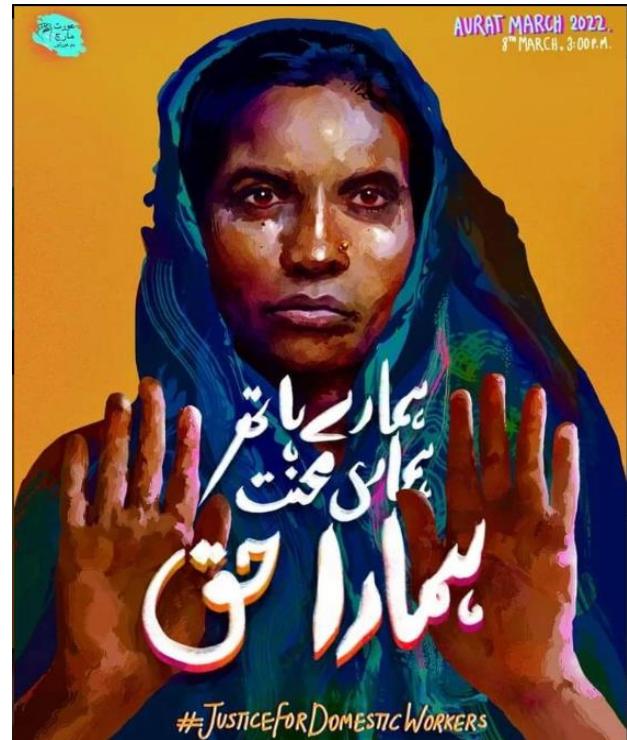


Figure 13: "Poster about domestic workers produced for *Aurat March*." 6 March. 2022, @auratmarch.

worker in the poster are a strong reflection of the exertion and toiling that is inherent to the work of domestic workers in private households. Rather than smooth manicured fingers that most media present as a norm, this poster shows the rough, unkempt hands indicating hard work and manual labor. It also illustrates the fact that domestic workers do not have the time to take care of themselves in this way due to the all-consuming nature of their employment, where they are completely subservient to the owner of the household and their time is not their own. The raised hands in addition display an attempt to say no to the unfair treatment and stand up for herself. The raised hands are also symbolic of surrender to authorities, showing that one means no harm; here,

the raised hands serve the twofold meaning of both putting a stop to the inequitable situation and surrendering this unenviable position non-violently.

Lastly, this poster indexically informs audiences of the time of *March*, the slogan for the poster, and the hashtag showing the focus of the poster i.e., #Justice for Domestic Workers. There is text in bold white Urdu as well which reads: *Hamare Haath, Hmari Mehnat, Hmara Haq* “Our hands, Our Hard work, Our right”. This highlights the struggles of underpaid laborers in Pakistan and demonstrates their fight for equitable pay. Finally, another indexical sign is that the woman in the poster holds her gaze outside the frame, possibly towards her employer it appears that she is asking with her eyes and her hands. That person outside the frame can be extrapolated to be the viewers themselves, putting audiences in the place of those employers upholding the inequitable labor arrangements and therefore involving audiences in the responsibility they share. Thus, Figure 13 puts emphasis on the grueling nature of domestic work by showing the weariness of the domestic worker. It asks the viewers to fight for better employment conditions and equitable pay for domestic laborers who are not paid equivalent to their hard work and are only given minimum wage and do not receive the benefits that other workers receive (Mehmood), by holding viewers to account for the system.

In Figure 14, the image displays a woman wearing a uniform with her arms crossed and a mask on her face. There is text on speech bubbles in the poster, a tagline at the top, purple virus, and silver chains. Symbolic signs presented in Figure 14 show the female frontline health worker to be visibly stressed about the conditions and the demands of her work. She is wearing a Pakistani healthcare worker’s uniform, and her green gloves and mask are symbolic of hospital green, telling viewers that this is a medical worker. Her eyebrows are drawn, and her face is taut displaying the fact that she is worried and uncomfortable. Also, her arms are crossed over one another in what

appears to be a defensive or possibly a defiant stance. This illustrates her attempt to protect herself. Iconically, there are a few important elements to note: the purple virus, the silver chains, and the fact that she is by herself. Since this poster was part of the *Aurat March* 2021 during the time of

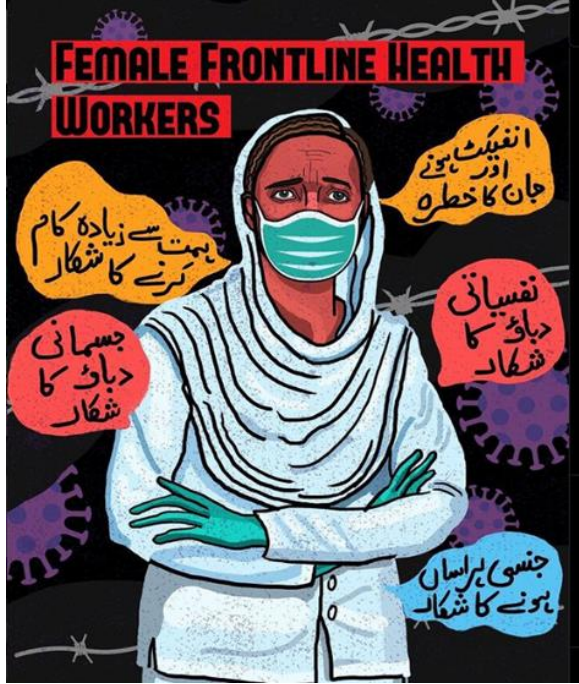


Figure 14: “Poster about Female Frontline Health Workers produced for *Aurat March*.” 1 March, 2021, @auratazadimarch.

Covid-19, the purple virus represents Covid-19 virus. Purple color assists the virus in standing out on the dark background of the poster. Silver chains imply danger and the crossing of safety lines that is an inevitable part of the healthcare work performed by frontline healthcare workers in dire safety conditions. They also represent restrictions and limitations faced by the healthcare workers. For the reason that the frontline health worker is shown by herself and in a defensive stance it hints at her apprehension of doing this alone and her need for support as well.

Indexically, this poster has a lot of text, starting with the heading which tells us clearly that this poster is about the struggles of “Female Frontline Health Workers”. In addition, we have five taglines in bold Urdu reading: *Infected hone aur Jaan kaa Khatra* “Danger of being infected and danger to life”, *Nafsiati Dabao Kaa Khatra* “Danger of being emotionally abused”, *Jinsi Harasan hone kaa khatra* “Danger of being sexually harassed”, *Himmat sae zyada kaam karne kaa khatra* “Danger of working more than your capability”, and *Jismai Dabao kaa shikaar* “Victim of physical pressures”. To sum it up, all five taglines represent the different kinds of danger that female frontline health workers had to face while working in unfavorable conditions during the

Covid-19 pandemic. Also, they represent the workers' restrictions and limitations when it comes to protecting themselves from the dangers they face.

Different semiotic signs of the poster in Figure 14 alert the viewers of the dangerous and unsafe working conditions of frontline health workers who do not have an option of refusing the work that is asked of them. It asks for safer working conditions for health workers and better treatment for them. The purple virus is in the background with the chain/barbed wire, keeping this worker at a distance from the rest of society, perhaps keeping her away from her family and instead working long hours in the hospital. The taglines are presented as thought bubbles, suggesting that these issues are all ones she has to consider all the time, leaving her exhausted, worried, isolated, and generally not thriving in healthy work conditions. And her protective stance and worried expression shows the distress of the healthcare workers.

The image in Figure 15 resembles that of a Pakistani 500 rupee note, with the exception of a woman in the center instead of a male politician. There is text on image and a logo at the bottom. In terms of the symbolic signs of Figure



Figure 15: Poster about Women's Labor produced for "Aurat March." 19 February, 2022, @auratmarch.

implication of the value of labor of the domestic worker standing in front of it. Considering the traditional clothing of the worker and the rupee note there is a contrast between the value of the currency and the value of women's labor that is being made here: women domestic workers are grossly undervalued for their labor. Also, the woman in the poster who is seen wearing traditional

Pakistani clothes i.e., *Shalwar Kameez* shows a grave expression depicting the severity of the issue at hand. The fact that her skin is entirely blue along with her clothes helps her to stand out on the banknote, like the influential political figures that are usually present on banknotes.

Iconically the banknote represents wages. And in relation with the figure of the woman domestic worker, it serves to illustrate the unpaid labor of domestic workers. Banknotes usually have the image of important political or historical figures, but in this image that figure is replaced by a domestic worker. This highlights the importance of the work that domestic workers do for the community, the central role that they play in it functioning well. At the same time, because she is both before and within the image of the banknote, she is also identified with it, in and as money, which suggests that she is both undervalued and objectified as making value for other people.

Indexically the poster includes the text on the banknote which is a play on the value of women's labor and its relation to the value of the banknote currency. It says: *Bank Doulat Pakistan, Paanch So Rupay Aur Aurat Ki Mehnat Muft Muft Muft!!!* "Bank Note Pakistan Five Hundred Rupees and Women's Labor Free Free Free!!!". The association here is that the aforementioned bank note has a monetary value of five hundred while there is no monetary value for women's hard-earned labor. Semiotic signs of the poster in Figure 15 specifically bring attention to women's labor that is often underappreciated and underpaid. It insists on the need for appreciating women's hard-earned labor and not discriminating against the value of someone's work due to their gender identity.

In Figure 16, there is an image displaying a lone woman without an umbrella in a crowd of people with umbrellas. There is text on top of the umbrellas, and a hashtag, a date and a logo on the image itself. Symbolically in Figure 16 we can see the woman in the orange clothes with a distressed appearance who seemingly appears to have given up and lost all hope about getting any

justice with regards to her labor. In addition, the other working women in the poster are seen carrying umbrellas, which represent different kinds of working benefits received by the other women as compared to those that are experienced by domestic or low wage workers. That coupled with the blue color that engulfs the poster and the lone figure of the domestic worker who is the only one unsheltered and without the safety net of the metaphorical umbrella of better working conditions, illustrates how domestic workers are subjected to harsh working conditions and lack the benefits that are offered to people with other kind of jobs.

The iconic signs in the poster include the repetitive text on the umbrellas which are seen shielding the other working women from the blue haze of rain that everyone seems to be submerged in. From left to right the text mentions “childcare services”, “work for living wages”,



Figure 16: “Poster about domestic workers produced for *Aurat March*.” 20 February, 2022, @auratmarch.

“equal pay”, “contracts”, and “maternity leave”. As a result, it is evident that the cards that women domestic workers are dealt with are worse than that of the working women in other fields who get better pay, more benefits and better working conditions. Indexically the most crucial aspect is the hashtag that covers the top left corner of the poster in bold white Urdu. It reads *#Hamari Mehnat Hmara Haq Ujrat, Tahafuz Aur Sukoon!!* “Our Hard work Our Right Wages, Security and Peace!!”. This is a

clear representation of the focus on fighting for living wages and job security of domestic and low wage workers. We can also see the logo of *Aurat March* on the bottom left and date of the *March*

on the bottom right corner which provides information about and the association with the *Aurat March's* Movement. As a result, the semiotic signs of the poster in Figure 16 illustrate the difficulties faced by women domestic workers who are especially affected by the lack of necessary services that are often provided to women workers in the formal economy. This goes to show how the nature of their work makes them vulnerable and why there is a need for better working conditions for women domestic workers.

In Figure 17, there is a group of men and women in an open area of what appears to be the middle of a street or a neighborhood. They are holding placards, objects, or raising their fists in a sign of protest. There are birds and buildings in the background as well. Symbolically the women and men in the poster stand for the manual laborers of Pakistan. The tools that they are carrying, such as the broom, the cart, and some other unidentifiable tools,



Figure 17: “Poster about low wage manual workers produced for *Aurat March*.” 18 February, 2022, @auratmarch.

depict a range of low wage manual work across different fields such as construction work, house cleaning or domestic work. Carpentry, plumbing, and welding are also just a few other examples of low wage manual labor that need to be recognized for the dangerous and physically demanding nature. In addition, for the iconic signs the brown buildings in the background of the poster display the way domestic workers and low wage laborers permeate through different neighborhoods in the community. It is through their work and efforts that countless households are able to function daily.

Also, the birds in the top of the poster refer to the worker’s struggle for freedom from harsh working conditions.

Indexically, the text in Urdu in the posters held by the protestors state their demands for a fair and just workplace environment. From left to right the two posters read: *Hamari Mehnat ki Sahi Ujrat Dou* “Give us fair pay for our hard work”, *Hamari Zindagi Qeemti hae, Hamain Hifazti Saman Dou* “Our life is valuable, Give us protective equipment”. Thus, the different semiotic signs of this poster come together to depict the adverse working conditions that low wage manual workers are based on. The poster then, by showing the lack of safety equipment and safe working conditions, and the importance of the work of manual laborers in our community showcases the need for better working conditions and better pay for low wage manual laborers.

In terms of the image in Figure 18, there are several faces grouped together, a few arms reaching out to the top or the outside of the poster. There is a slogan on top and bottom of the

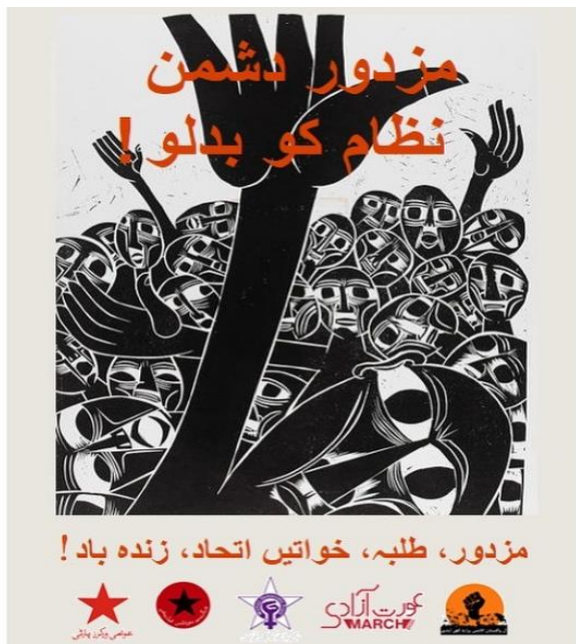


Figure 18: “Poster about workers produced for *Aurat March*.” 13 October. 2020, @auratazadimarch.

poster, and five logos on the bottom as well. The symbolic signs in the poster in Figure 18 are found in the myriad of faces that are covering the bulk of the poster, faces that we know are representative of laborers of Pakistan because the text identifies them as workers. Their expressions range from distress, resignation, and imploring, and they are crowded together almost on top of each other. Some arms reach up, with large-eyed faces looking directly at the viewer, so it appears that they are urging the viewer to pay attention to their demands

for livable wages and fair working conditions. Iconic signs in this poster are the five colorful logos at the bottom of the image that represent different political organizations in the country. Of the five logos I could recognize only three while the other two were not legible enough, but the context suggests they are all workers groups or unions. The first one from the left is Awami Worker's Party, the third one is Women Democratic Front and the fourth one from the left is for *Aurat Azadi March*. These different political groups have come together to fight for the rights of workers, students, and women because the issue of lack of fair pay and unfavorable working conditions impacts the members of all these groups.

Bold orange Urdu text on the top and bottom of the poster indexically points to the slogans of the *March*. The top one states: *Mazdoor Dushman Nizaam Ko Badlo!* "Change the Worker Harmful System!". And the lower one states: *Mazdoor, Talba, Khwateen Itehad, Zindabad!* "Worker, Student, Women's Alliance, Forever!". These slogans urge for just treatment and favorable conditions for workers and illustrates solidarity between different social groups such as students, women, and workers. Semiotically, the poster of Figure 18 shows that different social groups across the country have joined together as a united front to implore better working conditions for workers and shows the suffering of the workers. Altogether, this highlights the urgency of the issue and cements the fact that changes need to be made to the systems that are in place in relation to wages and treatment of workers.

The image in Figure 19 consists of a street art of three women in traditional clothing, with water pots on top of their heads. There is an alligator and some flowers in the vicinity of the women, and there is text on their clothes. Symbolically Figure 19 shows a group of three water bearers wearing traditional Pakistani regional clothing, carrying multiple water pots stacked on top of each other. Water bearers are a huge part of the workforce, especially in remote areas of the

country without access to safe drinking water. They carry water from wells for their own families and deliver water to other people as well (“Capturing the Lives of Pakistan’s Water Carriers”). If we interpret the water bearers as iconic signs, there appears to be sand and flowers represented at the bottom of the image, which alludes to the long distances these women have to travel through – across different fields of flowers or dry land, for instance – while carrying the weight of multiple water pots on their heads. And lastly, the alligator in the bottom left corner of the image iconically refers to the dangers that the water bearers might face while trying to collect water from dangerous, remote areas.

Indexically, we can read the text covering the water bearers in the image, Urdu text in



Figure 19: “Street Art about women’s labor produced for *Aurat March*.” 7 March. 2021, @auratazadimarch.

mahogany red on the backs of two of the figures. It contains slogans from the *March*, relating the struggles of water bearers to the larger collective cause of the *March*. From left to right it reads: *Jaan sae pyaari Azadi* “Dearer than life Freedom” and *Haq hae Hamara Azadi* “Freedom is our Right”. These slogans show the lengths the participants of the *March* are ready to go to for justice and to receive the rightful treatment that they deserve as part of the working force that is running this country.

Also, there is a date written at the bottom left of the image which seems to have been cut off. But going back to the time and the month and the year this street art was posted on the official Instagram account of *Aurat Azadi March*, @auratazadimarch, and the fact that this specific street

art image of the water bearers was a part of the *Aurat March's* movement to highlight the hard work and the role of women laborers in our lives titled “The Labor of Love”, the date written in Urdu numerical that is cut off in the image should read 8th March 2021. That is the date of the *March* being held that year.

To sum it up, semiotically the signs of the image in Figure 19 illustrate the fact that the work of water bearers is hard and demanding and needs to be appreciated more. It illuminates the determination of workers in Pakistan in terms of fighting for their rights and shows that they will not be easily dissuaded from their pursuit of just working conditions.

Finally, in Figure 20 there is an image of a street art¹⁶ of woman with a sewing machine. A symbol of fire lights up her back. And there is text in the image as well. Symbolically in Figure 20 the woman in the image demonstrates the undervalued informal industry of women tailors who often have small tailor shops built in one of the rooms in their homes. They are not part of the formal economy, so they do not receive the benefits and recognition that people who are a part of the formal economy receive. Also, there is a symbol of fire behind the woman seamstress that shows the passion and tenacity of the women seamstresses who work really hard to survive even in the face of unfavorable working conditions.

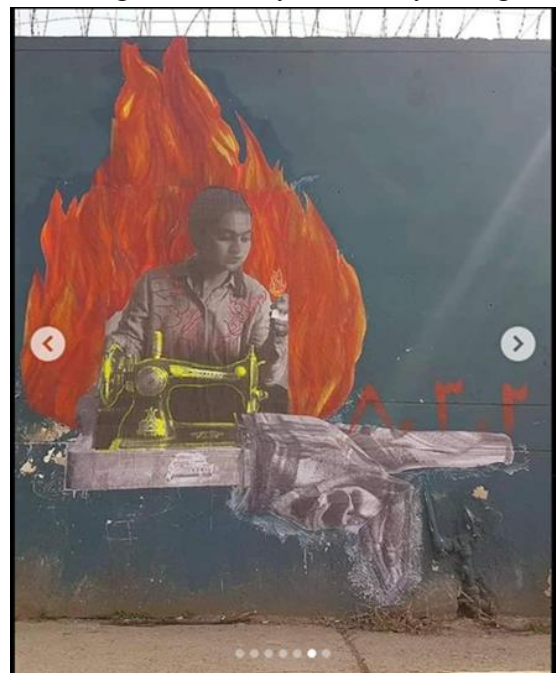


Figure 20: “Street Art about women’s labor produced for *Aurat March*.” 7 March. 2021, @auratazadimarch.

¹⁶ Figures 19 and 20 are part of the same social media post published at @auratazadimarch in 2021, in appreciation of the underappreciated members of the workforce in the Pakistani society.

In relation to the iconic signs of Figure 20 there is text on the shoulders of the woman seamstress that refers to certain slogans from the *March*. The left one was not legible so I could not really tell what it said but the right one says: *Rozgaar ki Azaadi* “Freedom of Livelihood”. This is one of the popular slogans of the *March* and part of the effort made by *March* to fight for women’s right to livable wages and better working conditions. Indexically, text in bright orange at the lower right lists the date of the *March* being held that year. The numbers in the Urdu language and the last digit seems to be cut off from the picture but it should read 8-2021 considering this picture is from the street art in Pakistan made in 2021 to raise awareness about the appalling working environments of women workers.

Consequently, this image semiotically brings attention to the perseverance of women workers who are part of the informal economy of Pakistan and have found ways to earn a living even in face of patriarchal societal norms which restrict women to the household. It also highlights the fact that there needs to be awareness and changes in attitude towards the work of women laborers as they are an equally important yet neglected part of our economy.

On the whole, the posters and street art in the *Aurat March* that talk about women’s labor are important because of the fact that they highlight the specific problems faced by women and low wage workers such as domestic workers, full time housewives, manual laborers. They depict the discrimination against women and their labor because of their gender, the discrimination against informal women workers in low paying jobs who are not given the same resources and services as women in the formal sector, and the lack of safe working conditions for women healthcare workers as well. Also, they show the emotional pain of the workers such as guilt, stress, distress, and pain that is visible in form of the expressions of the workers. As a result, these posters illustrate women worker’s pain and collectively call out for change in relation to women’s

treatment in the workforce, an appreciation of their hard work, better pay and better working conditions for women in different sectors and lastly, giving women's work the same level of respect that is given to the same work done by a man.

With the visual semiotic analysis, interpretants are able to see through the lived experience how pervasive and severe the emotional and physical impacts of unfair treatment of women's labor are to the women in our society. It allows us to witness the various different ways that diminishing the value of women's labor can have an adverse impact on women's mental and physical well-being. Also, these posters illustrate attempts and efforts being made by women and men alike to fight for fair pay and the dangers of their inadequate working conditions. The posters and street art from *Aurat March* illustrate that lack of proper employment conditions, fair wages and safe working conditions does not just effect one group of people but people belonging from different social groups and religious or ethnic identities (Chughtai). It is this inclusion of various social groups in the discussion of women's labor in the *Aurat March* posters that is crucial in relation to feminist protest in Pakistan.

Chapter 5: Women's Health

In this chapter on women's health, my focus is on the posters from *Aurat March* that address not only healthcare for women, but also the kinds of healthcare services that are available, gender-based discrimination against women's health care, the tireless work of women healthcare workers in our community and on the frontlines, and unsafe working conditions for women healthcare workers. This topic is of particular importance in relevance to the *March* because the primary underlying reason behind the deplorable conditions of healthcare for women is the male-dominated patriarchal society in Pakistan which creates several barriers preventing women from getting the appropriate treatment they need. Some examples of such barriers include not letting them go out to get treatment, the dismissal and ignorance of women's pain, and the lack of infrastructure and resources available to cater to women's health needs.

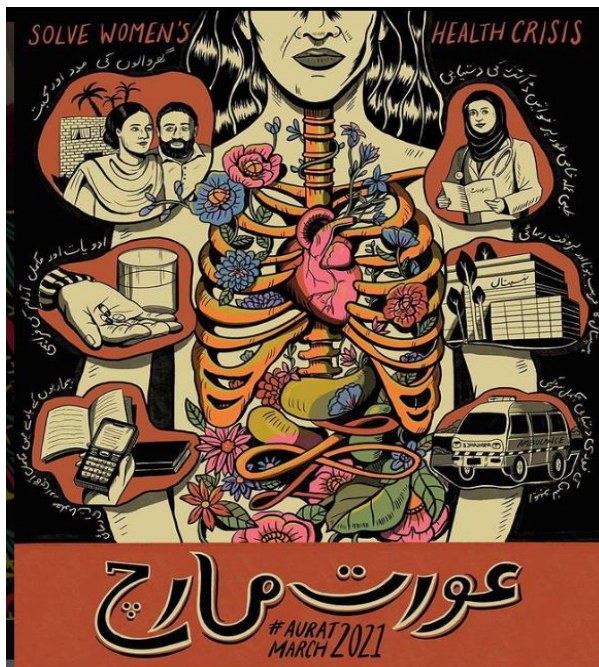


Figure 21: "Poster about women's health crisis produced for *Aurat March*." 15 February, 2021, @auratmarchlahore.

Firstly, in Figure 21 there is a woman in the center with her skeleton and organs on display. There are six different images within the poster that surround the woman from all sides. There is text with each image, a tagline at the top of the poster, and text on the bottom of the poster. The symbolic meanings found in the poster in Figure 21 make clear the needs for women's health in Pakistan. The symbols of her body, and the flowers embedded in her work together to symbolize that women deserve care and

recognition for their health needs. Secondly, the image denotes meaning iconically: six different

images represent six different aspects that need to be considered while working towards providing better healthcare for women. These include support of family, the need for women doctors, the accessibility of medicines and medical resources, the need for hospitals to be geographically accessible, the availability of comprehensive information about different diseases and health conditions, and lastly, quick ambulance services.

Thirdly, there is a lot of text on the poster indexically referring to the policy changes demanded in the *March*. At the top there is the statement: “Solve Women’s health Crisis”, which directly refers to the struggles of women to get adequate and necessary healthcare treatments due to physical and gender-based barriers and what needs to be done to alleviate the condition. From left to right, the sentences surrounding the six images read:

Ghar waalon ki madad aur Mohabat “Family’s support and love”,

Tibi Aala Khaas Tour Par Khwateen Doctors ki Dasteabi “Availability of Medical Staff Especially Women Doctors”,

Adviat aur mukamal araam ki faryabi “Provision of medicines and complete rest”.

Haspital kaa qareeb hona aur barwaqt rehayi “The need for hospitals to be near and immediate admission”,

Beemarion kae baare main mukamal agaahi aur maaloomat ki dastiyabi “Complete availability of awareness and information regarding diseases”,

Ambulance ki foran dastiyabi, mukamal sarkain “Immediate service of ambulance, finished roads”.

Not only do these statements narrate the images they accompany, but they connect visually the needs of women to social roles and to their bodies. The bright pink, orange, yellow and green parts of the woman's body are intertwined with each other, with the roles of women represented in the world, and the text-based calls for health care change. And not to forget, there is a red banner at the bottom which reads *Aurat March* in Urdu and #Aurat March 2021 English respectively, reminding us that the need for adequate women's healthcare services is one of the topics being focused on in the *March*.

As a result, the three different semiotic readings of the poster in Figure 21 showcase the aspects of the healthcare service industries in Pakistan that need to be improved to provide better care to women, ultimately strengthening not just their care, but the population as a whole. Through six different examples, this poster reflects on the way the healthcare industry has neglected to consider women's healthcare needs and what needs to be worked on. It denotes the importance of familial support to women during health crises and brings attention to all the different changes that need to be made to infrastructure and employment of medical staff for better healthcare for women.

In the poster for Figure 22 from the *Aurat March*, there is a group of five women with different skin colors, hairstyles, and clothing. They are sitting together in meditating postures, with the symbol of a uterus in the background and flowers around them. There is text on top and on bottom of the poster. The first and foremost symbolic sign is the group of five women with varying skin colors representing different ethnic and religious communities across Pakistan. The flowers spreading out through the poster along the bottom work together with the dark green background to allude to the earth and nature; this symbolism and iconic representation makes a connection between caring for women and for the environment, for focusing on making ways for them both to flower and prosper. With respect to the main iconic sign in the image, a uterus is bracketing the

group of women, holding them together amidst the flowering green around them. This is a reference to women’s reproductive health, connecting the women together and with nature in shared potential and need in order to flourish. This includes the required accessibility to necessary resources, provision of adequate healthcare services, educating people about their reproductive rights, and needs related to their maternal health. But the uterus also works indexically, connecting all birthing bodies together in a potentially essentialist common goal, but one which remains important because reproductive health is underfunded and overlooked.

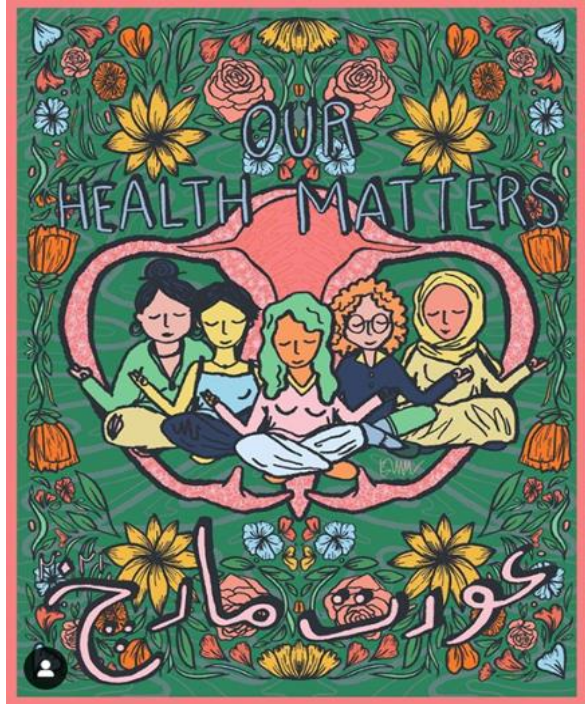


Figure 22: “Poster about Women’s reproductive health produced for *Aurat March*.” 23 February. 2021, @auratmarchlahore.

Lastly, for indexical signs the blue English text on the top of the poster shows that women’s health is a major issue, one that affects women regardless of race or ethnicity. It reads: “Our Health Matters” and in relation to the iconic sign of the uterus we can deduce that the focus of the poster is on women’s reproductive health. Second, the pink text reads: *Aurat March* “Aurat March” indicating that this is a poster made for the purpose of the *Aurat March*. The needs fought for in the *March* are needs that affect all women.

Simply put, reading the messages semiotically in the poster in the Figure 22 reveals the message about the importance of women’s healthcare, irrespective of race, ethnic, or religious backgrounds, and the need for a more holistic and inclusive outlook towards healthcare services, where health is considered a matter of flourishing, related to the fecundity of nature.

In Figure 23, there are two young girls in traditional Pakistani clothing. One of them has



Figure 23: “Poster about menstrual health awareness produced for *Aurat March*.” 27 February, 2022, @auratmarch.

period stains on her clothes. There is a bloody sanitary napkin in the image as well. Also, there is text surrounding the girls and a logo at the bottom of the poster. The focus on reproductive health is shared in the poster in Figure 23, where the two figures symbolize people who menstruate. This is evident by the bloodied sanitary napkin next to the girl on the left wearing an all-black outfit, and the red stains on the white trousers of the girl on the right. While the girl on the left has an angry expression, the expression of the girl on the right has one of distressed resignation. The bright red

circle that encapsulates two girls figures is also helpful, as indexically it captures viewers’ attention and urges viewers to focus their vision on the middle of the poster where the blood is, centralizing period blood as the main concern. Moreover, the circle on which the girls are centralized is itself centered on an iconic representation of a playing card, specifically the queen. Not only does this focus attention on the girls and the period blood – and therefore the need for people to take this seriously – but the playing card underscores that these people are queens: either to be treated royally as such, or perhaps to stop being treated as such. Royalty is associated with luxury, but the message is that periods are not a luxury. The iconicity of the queen of hearts playing cards both supports the focus on people with periods as special and demands that focus to be rethought. It also serves to highlight ironically the fact that period products are not a luxury.

Iconically, the speech bubble at the top left of the figure, has the word tax crossed out. This refers to the demands of the Women's movement to remove taxes from period products because period products are a basic everyday need of women and girls from all kinds of socioeconomic background and not a luxury product that only a few people should be able to afford. Also, the second speech bubble at the bottom right shows a broken heart indicating how the girls and people who period is heartbroken and disappointed with the unfair treatment towards them and their needs. Lastly, the image of the bloodied sanitary napkin is again illustrative of the act of menstruation that is experienced by girls and people who have periods.

Indexically, in Figure 23 the sentence that goes around the red circle states: "My Period is not a luxury", simply, the fact that period products are an integral part of the lives of girls and people who menstruate, not an unnecessary or frivolous item. Better access to and provision of period products is a basic necessity not a luxury. Consequently, poster in Figure 23 reflects the menstrual needs of people who menstruate; by showing that menstruation is a part of everyday life of young girls and women rather than a luxury, it demonstrates the need for better menstrual services, such as access to adequate healthcare and access to affordable menstrual products.

In the image in Figure 24 there is a poster held by a protestor at one of the marches of *Aurat March*. The poster contains a tagline at the top and the symbol of a uterus at the bottom. Symbolically in the poster in Figure 24, the bright orange color serves as a background for the poster and captures people's attention, bringing viewers eyes to the poster and towards the more meaningful white part. The white center of the poster is beneficial for the text and the image on the poster to be more legible; it is the point of focus. The main iconic sign of this image is the uterus in the poster, an implication with the text to focus on women's and birthing peoples' struggles for their reproductive rights and bodily autonomy. This is in reference to women not

having a say in how their bodies are treated in terms of not having access to adequate healthcare, policing of their bodies, and the discrimination that they face due to being the minority genders.

The symbolism that is the colors works with the indexical text-based portion of the poster: the orange focuses viewers on the words ‘MY BODY’, and then leads viewers into the white area ‘IS NOT YOUR BATTLEGROUND’. Breaking up the text in this way serves another function: it allows any viewer to say, ‘My Body’ and to identify with the message of the poster, promoting a notion of a shared right, or at least the need for one.

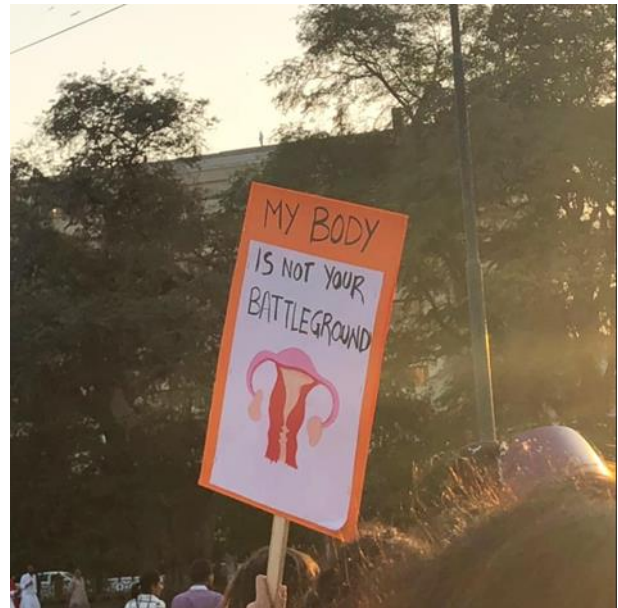


Figure 24: “Poster about women’s reproductive rights produced for *Aurat March*.” 9 March. 2018, @auratmarch.

Indexically the black text that is clear and legible reads: “MY BODY IS NOT YOUR BATTLEGROUND”. This quite evidently hints at the controversies and debates surrounding women claiming ownership to their bodies. This is to say that whenever a women assert their rights they are likely to face malicious defamation, objectification of their bodies, allegations of blasphemy, and misrepresentation by the people who oppose the movement. Some examples of the kind of systematic issues that women are addressing that constitute ownership of their bodies and are the cause of controversy are sexual and reproductive health, consent, marriage, bodily autonomy, sexuality, and body politics in patriarchy (Mukhtar et al. 439). The reason for their opposition is that they do not want the *March* to challenge existing patriarchal norms and have to take responsibility for their actions including the different kinds of gender-based violence, as mentioned in Chapter 3, that they have committed against women.

The poster in Figure 24 in the context of *Aurat March* semiotically brings attention to the very crucial issue of bodily autonomy for women. It depicts a need for discussions and changes in attitudes regarding how bodies of certain people are weaponized to alienate and oppress them. Also, it talks about the need to address their needs in a proper manner and listen to their point of view rather than imposing on them.

The image in Figure 25 depicts a woman in the middle who appears to be surrounded a



Figure 25: “Poster about Women Healthcare workers produced for *Aurat March*.” 28 February, 2021, @auratmarchlahore.

several sets of eyes. The top of the poster displays three different scenes of children playing with each other. There is text in the middle of the poster. Symbolically, in Figure 25 the attire and the bag of the woman in the poster illustrate that she is a community healthcare worker that goes door to door to meet her community’s health needs. In addition, the myriad of different sized eyes that cover most of the area of the poster allude to the gossip and scandal that a lot of women

health workers unfortunately face while trying to carry out their jobs. This is in reference to misrepresentation of character of women workers if they have to interact with male community members during their job, due to patriarchal values of the society (Mumtaz et al. 266). Also, the expression of the woman healthcare worker vividly expresses discomfort, showing the unease that women healthcare workers feel during their door-to-door community work. The contrast from top to down, of bright colors and happy faces of children to dark, gloomy, and uneasy face of the lady

health care worker displays the issue at hand, that is although lady health care workers are responsible for a huge part of children's healthcare through vaccination and immunization, they are not given the respect that they deserve for that work.

With regards to the iconic signs of Figure 25, there are three images that show a couple of children riding bicycles, playing football, or coming home from school respectively. This is to indicate how the daily efforts of women health care workers plays a huge role in children's health and prosperity. This is because women health care workers are majorly responsible for vaccination of children and women, especially in low-income communities in Pakistan (Jalal 143). The text in the poster that constitutes the indexical signs of Figure 25 is as follows: "Aurat March", "Aurat – 2021 – March", "End Polio Now". These different phrases mention that this poster belongs to the *Aurat March* of 2021, and show that the woman healthcare worker is on her way to provide polio drops door to door.

The different semiotic signs of the poster in Figure 25 demonstrate first the obstacles faced by community healthcare workers especially women and secondly it shows how crucial their work is to the community. It thus urges the viewers to treat community healthcare workers with the respect they deserve rather than making them uncomfortable while they try to carry out their jobs.

In the image in Figure 26 there is a group of differently-abled women, sitting or standing atop a bridge. The fact that their skin colors are different could be an indication of different ethnic or religious identities. There is a tagline at the top of the poster and text on the bridge itself. Symbolically, we can see that the women in the poster have distressed expressions showing their dissatisfaction and troubled feelings at the state of women's health crisis in Pakistan. Also, the bridge that they are standing or sitting on alludes to the metaphorical bridge that needs to be

crossed for the progress of women's health crisis. Their staunch stance and determined expressions imply that they are steadfast in their demands and are not going to hide or go away until their needs are met and there is progress made in the healthcare services available to them. The green background and greenery at the back is an indication of the prosperity that we can gain if we provide the required support and resources to those in need. The green also stands for nature and natural order and indicates that being differently abled does not make someone unnatural, they still belong to the natural order of the world.

For the iconic signs it is evident that the wheelchair, walking sticks and a person with one arm are showing that this group of people are a representation of the differently abled people in our community who are not hiding their differently-abled bodies but are openly facing the community demanding acceptance and acknowledgement. There are two lines of text on the top and the bottom of the poster which constitute the indexical signs of the poster. The yellow text on the top reads: *Ham Munfarid, Ahem aur Kaabil Hain* "We are Unique, Important, and Capable". This is in relation to the notion that differently-abled people are deserving of proper health and wellness as well. Also, the English text at the bottom clearly reads: *Aurat Azadi March* illustrating that the poster belongs to the movement of *Aurat March*.

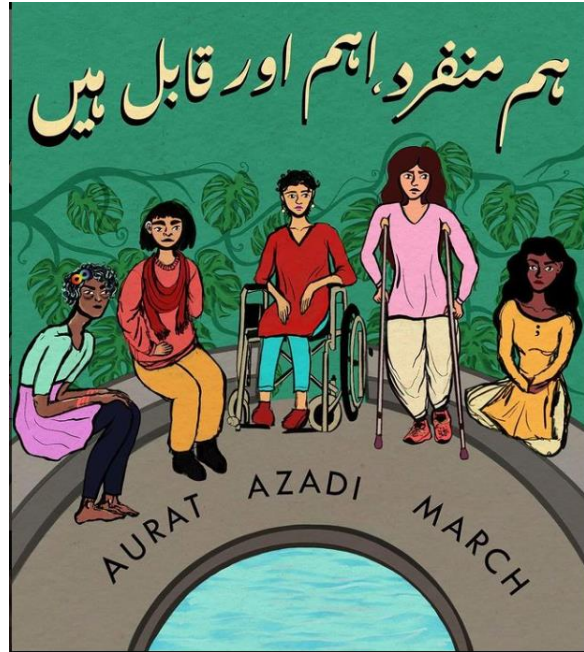


Figure 26: "Poster about Disability Justice produced for *Aurat March*." 2 March, 2021, @auratazadimarch.

The semiotic signs of the poster in Figure 26 enlighten the viewers regarding the healthcare needs of differently-abled people in our community. This group is often neglected and not provided with their specific healthcare needs and services. And it stresses the fact that they are equal



members of the society and should not be looked down on due to their different ableness.

In Figure 27, there are four images displaying different scenes from inside two households, a marketplace, and a hospital. There is text within each image. For the symbolic signs of the poster there are four different aspects of the women’s health crisis that are being highlighted here. At the top left corner is an image of a woman being

Figure 27: “Poster about patriarchal violence produced for *Aurat March*.” 3 March. 2021, @auratazadimarch.

trapped in her house due to the Covid-19 lockdown and suffering from the threat of domestic violence as shown by the steel bars, the two walls, the shadow of someone raising their hand, and the woman cowering in fear and trying to protect herself. In the top right corner, there is an image of a household where one woman is clearly in extreme pain, while the other is cooking. And a man is going out to get medicine rather than let the woman get the appropriate treatment that she requires. This illustrates the culturally acceptable and normative expectation for women which is to do the household work and for men to go outside. Also, women being in pain is not considered that important, and they are expected to defer to men to assess and address the need of that pain, an expectation that this poster shows as inadequate to address the problem. In addition, in the

bottom left image, the two men in the image and the market setting is symbolic of the fact that lady healthcare workers have to seamlessly weave through different settings for their community-based work. Their work is not limited to a single job description; rather they have to perform a lot of tasks to meet the needs of the community (Mumtaz et al. 264). Moving on, the last bottom right picture shows a woman in traditional Balochi attire meaning that this woman and the health facility is situated in Balochistan, a province in Pakistan, which has the highest maternal mortality rate in the country due to the lack of appropriate healthcare measures and timely actions (Arif et al. 318). This brings focus to the dire situation of women's healthcare in Pakistan.

Iconically, in Figure 27 the word lockdown in the top left image illustrates that this domestic violence was occurring during the Covid-19 lockdown, making living conditions even more dangerous for women already in vulnerable situations. And the 1099 number – that is for a toll-free helpline from the government of Pakistan which provides counseling and legal aid- visible on the phone screen is to create awareness about the resources available to assist the victims in reporting abuse and getting help (Mehboob). From the picture of sanitary napkins on the wall in the top right image we can tell that woman is in pain probably due to periods. Also, the two blue and pink ribbons on top of the poster, simultaneously standing for men and women's health issues refer to the disparity in the treatment of health issues of both genders by showing how women are told to just endure through the pain while men are less likely to be told the same thing. In the bottom left image, the attire of the woman and her bag with the cross-sign show that she is a woman health care worker. And the table of miscellaneous goods along with the sign that reads: *Karyana Store* "Grocery Store" illustrates that this image depicts a marketplace setting, highlighting the lady health care workers' endless work in different places in the community. In the end, the bottom right image we see yellow tape that is clearly blocking the woman's entry into a health facility

showing difficulties women in Balochistan face while trying to gain access to health care, and the lack of resources.

Indexically, the text in each of the images in the poster is an appropriate description of the health crisis being depicted in this poster. First, the top left image contains the statement: “Increase in domestic violence against women amidst coronavirus lockdowns” showing that this incident represents the rise of domestic violence cases during Covid-19. Since due to the lockdowns during Covid-19 people were restricted to their homes more than before, giving greater opportunities for their abusers to hurt them (Baig et al. 525). In the top right image, there is a text bubble reading: “You’re not allowed to go to the hospital. It’s just pain, I will bring medicine”. This shows the society’s dismissive attitudes towards women’s health and the belief that women should be able to endure pain without getting medical help. In the bottom left image, the text that reads: “Lady Health workers are often unpaid, underpaid” hints at the unjust treatment that women health care workers experience. This is in reference to the sad reality of women health care workers who are not paid fair wages and highlights the need for better pay and treatment for this groups who has been fundamental in assisting healthcare systems in Pakistan, especially in low-income settings (Jalal 144). The struggles of healthcare workers in this poster relate to the struggles of other kinds of workers in Pakistani society such as domestic laborers and low wage workers, as mentioned in Chapter 4, in the sense that they are involved in arduous work but are not properly compensated for their work. In the bottom right image, the red “Emergency” sign illustrates that this is a health care facility, different phrases on the yellow tape: “non-functional, understaffed, damaged, closed, curfew” outline the various reasons getting necessary healthcare services is difficult in certain parts of Pakistan. The statement: “Balochistan has the highest maternal mortality rate” also shows how a lack adequate services is adversely affecting the lives of people in that province.

As a result, the semiotic signs in Figure 27 collectively illuminate the despair of women in face of inadequate healthcare services and facilities. The poster depicts the gaps that need to be filled in women's healthcare by highlighting the very specific cultural, social, and geographical setbacks that are at the forefront of the problem. Whether it is due to oppressive cultural norms, ignorance of gender-based domestic violence, unfair treatment of women health workers, or lack of proper healthcare services in remote areas there are lot of aspects of healthcare services that need to be improved to cater to women's needs. For instance, there is a need to spread awareness about the resources available to victims of domestic violence as is shown through the helpline number in the first image of the poster. Second, there need to be changes made to the attitude towards women's health needs as the second image in the poster clearly shows that the current attitudes and treatment of women's health concerns are not helping in alleviating women's pain properly. Third, the third image depicts the need to improve the salaries and provide better employment contracts and conditions to leady health care workers as the work that they do requires perseverance in face of the lack of rewards yet the high demands of their jobs. Lastly, the fourth image alerts the viewers the fact that the high maternal mortality rate in Balochistan is a direct result of lack of appropriate healthcare services and depicts the needs for better infrastructural support to alleviate the situation in the province of Balochistan.

In Figure 28 the image shows a woman and a man sitting on top of a big tablet. The main difference between the two figures is that the man is surrounded by several medicines while the woman only has a water bottle. There is text on top of the poster and a logo in the bottom left. Looking at the symbolic signs the big primarily blue circle imitating a medicinal tablet is an indication of the difference in healthcare resources and services for women and men. The fact that

blue color covers seventy-five percent of the tablet and pink only covers twenty-five percent is an allusion to the vast differences in how men and women’s health conditions are treated. For the iconic signs the figure of the woman along with a water bottle holding herself in pain, compared to the figure of the man lying on a pillow wearing sunglasses, looking more relaxed and with an array of tablets, and pill bottles next to him are a representation of the completely opposite manner in which illnesses are treated when it comes to men and women.

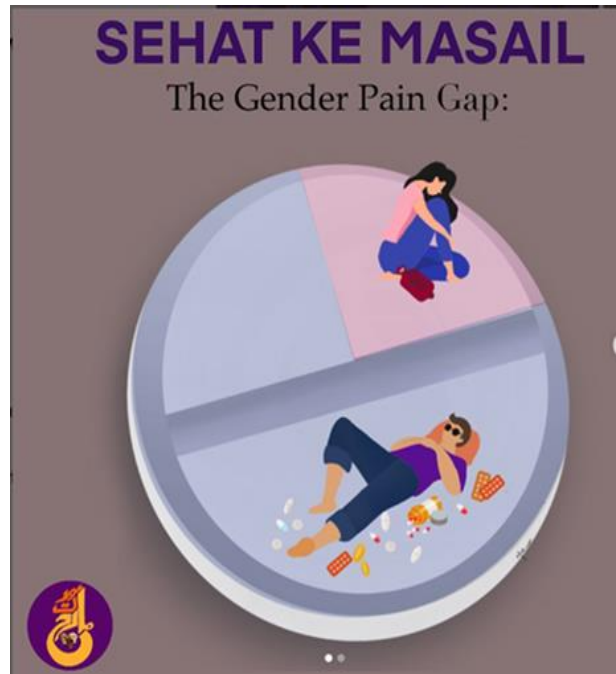


Figure 28: “Poster about Women’s Health produced for *Aurat March*.” 18 February, 2021, @auratmarchlahore.

Indexically, the bold purple text that reads *Sehat kae Masail* “Health Issues”, illustrates that this poster is about health crises. And the black subheading: “The Gender Pain Gap:” highlights that the big table in the poster is a representation of the disparity in how men and women are told to treat their pain. The purple and orange logo at the bottom left corner of the poster is of the social media account of @auratmarchlahore¹⁷. Consequently, the poster in Figure 28 illuminates the differences in the treatment of women’s and men’s healthcare needs. While men’s needs are considered important and they are provided with ample resources and services, women’s needs are often neglected, and they are told to deal with their pain themselves, similar to the depiction of the treatment of women’s pain in Figure 27. This poster then urges the viewers to

¹⁷ This logo is present on some of the posters published on the social media account (@auratmarchlahore on Instagram) but not all. The logo consists of the words “Aurat March” in Urdu and three small fists.

consider this stark gap and work towards alleviating the healthcare needs of women, and not discriminate based on someone’s gender identity.

In Figure 29 there is an image consisting of a big green surgical mask being held by a group of women and men in uniforms. There is text on the inside of the mask, a big letter H on top of the



Figure 29: “Poster about women healthcare workers produced for *Aurat March*,” 6 March, 2021, @auratmarch.

mask, and a logo at the bottom of the poster.

For the symbolic signs the white stick figures show four health care workers as evident by them wearing masks, surgical caps, and carrying a stethoscope. The big red H is for healthcare workers. And the grave expressions of the healthcare workers could be illustrating the heavy burden that healthcare officials had to bear as part of their work during the Covid-19 crisis. With respect to the iconic signs, the big green surgical mask that covers the majority of the

poster is alluding to the fact that this group of people are frontline health care workers. And the way they all are using their entire might to carry the mask is a representation of how frontline health care workers exhaust themselves physically and mentally while tackling health crises such as Covid-19.

For the indexical signs of the poster there is the black text at the top: “Women stand at the front lines of health and care work. Their labor is undervalued, and conditions are exploitative”. This shows the unjust treatment that healthcare workers face in Pakistan. Also, the bottom left of

the poster contains the logo for *Aurat March*, depicting that this poster belongs to the *March*. To sum it up, the semiotic signs of the poster in Figure 29 bring attention to the dangerous work that frontline women healthcare workers are required to do yet they are underappreciated and underpaid. It emphasizes the need for safe working conditions, better treatment, and equitable pay for frontline women healthcare workers.

For the image in Figure 30 there are two women in white clothes and wearing surgical masks. A lot of text in different colors along with a couple of flowers surround the women in the image. There is a logo in the bottom left as well. With respect to the symbolic signs we can see the flowers in a couple of places. These depict that healthcare workers are an important contributor to the prosperity and growth of our community. With regards to the iconic signs, the attire of the two women illustrates that they are healthcare officials since this is the traditional uniform of nurses and women doctors in Pakistan. Also, the stethoscope on the shoulders of one of the women also indicates that her profession is that of a healthcare worker. The masks they are wearing hints at the fact that they are in close proximity to unsafe working conditions where they are likely to get infected or catch a disease.

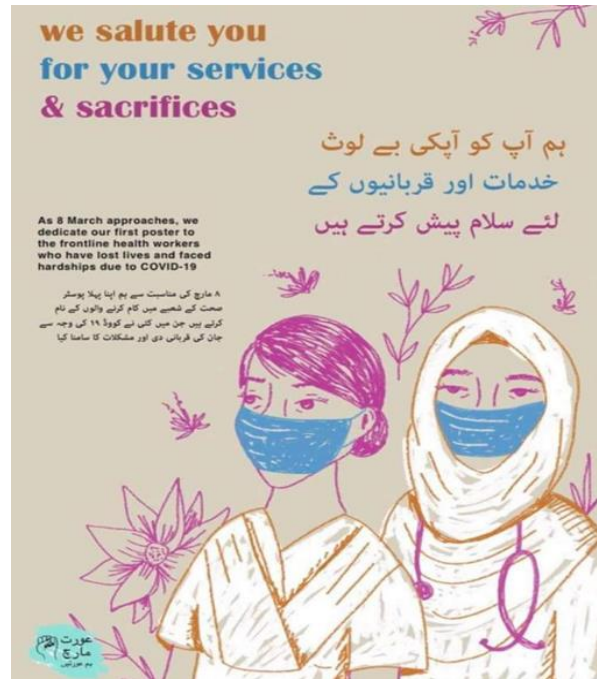


Figure 30: “Poster about women healthcare workers produced for *Aurat March*.” 22 February. 2021, @auratmarchlahore.

For the indexical signs there is ample text on the poster. In the top: We salute you for your services & sacrifices “*Ham aap ko aap ki bay los khidmat aur qurbaanion kae liye salam paesh*

karte hain” shows that this poster is for appreciating the work of healthcare workers. Since healthcare workers suffered through a great deal of fear and anxiety due to working during the unsafe conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, appreciating their work is likely to display a show of support and encourage them to keep doing their jobs efficiently (Khattak et al. 11). Also, the small paragraph: “As 8 March approaches we dedicate our first poster to the frontline health workers who have lost lives and faced hardships due to Covid-19” followed the same words in Urdu, *8 March ki Munasibat sae ham apna pehla poster sehat kae shobae main kaam karne waalon kae naam karte hain jin main kai nae Covid-19 ki waja sae jaan ki qurbaani di aur mushkilaat ka samna kia*, entails the tireless work of frontline healthcare workers during the Covid-19 pandemic. This puts emphasis on the losses that they have suffered during their work.

As a result, the semiotic signs of the poster in Figure 30 give homage to the tireless work of women healthcare workers. This poster then demonstrates the fact that the work of women healthcare workers especially those at the frontline and in unsafe working conditions needs to be appreciated more. Also, they need to be rewarded better for their services and dedication to the healthcare of our community considering the dangerous lengths that they have to go to for their work at the frontline.

Consequently, the posters regarding Women’s health in *Aurat March* shed light on the adverse conditions of women’s healthcare and the horrible treatment of women healthcare workers. Some posters illustrate the areas that need to be worked on whether it is provision of services in remote areas, availability of more resources and medicines, affordable menstrual products, while other put emphasis on not discriminating on someone’s healthcare needs because of their gender. They ask for the viewers to change their attitudes towards women’s health concerns, value the work of women healthcare workers, and not treat men and women’s pain

differently. Also, they encourage appreciating and respecting the work of the women healthcare workers on the frontline and in our community and providing safe working environments for women.

The visual semiotic analysis specifically elucidates through examples of lived experiences to the interpretants, fear and helplessness of women in face of women's health crisis in Pakistan. By depicting several big gaps in women's healthcare and treatment it also alerts the audience and the interpretants of the signs of the posters to the very real and physical threat to the lives of women, young girls, healthcare workers, and minority communities in Pakistan. The posters about women's healthcare from the *Aurat March* are important for the betterment of women's healthcare, because they dig deep into the issue of women's healthcare especially after the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated the women's health crisis in Pakistan, and they bring up discussions surrounding healthcare issues such as women's sexual and reproductive health that have not been brought up in an extensive way before.

Chapter 6: Freedoms and Justice

Chapter 6 on Freedoms and Justice consists of posters from the *Aurat March* which look at the unfair treatment of ethnic, religious, and gender minorities in Pakistan and the efforts being made to fight for justice for these communities. They illustrate the specific socio-political issues faced by minority communities such as transphobia, forced conversions, kidnapping and disappearance of ethnic minorities, gender-based violence, inadequate education for young girls, lack of accessibility services for differently abled people, and lastly present hope for a better future in which these prejudices and injustices do not exist. This helps in highlighting the various kinds of absences of freedoms and justice, that are faced by different minority and ethnic groups in Pakistan such as the absence of freedom of expression, dissent, political activism, social activism, and absence of freedom to live outside the confines of patriarchal societal norms.

In the image in Figure 31 there is a hand that is dumping three crumpled papers in a burning pile. The papers have words on them, and the poster has text at the top right corner and a hashtag at the bottom. Symbolically in Figure 31 the three crumpled papers being thrown in the burning pile represent three major societal issues in Pakistan. And the gloved hand that is throwing these three major issues into the burning pile, along with the bright red background of the poster indicates that these prejudices and biased narratives need to be thrown out. The fact that the

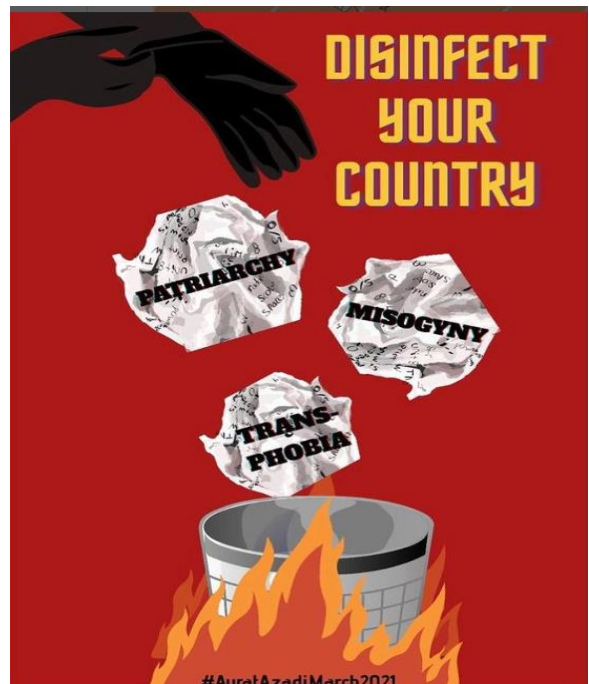


Figure 31: “Poster about women’s empowerment produced for *Aurat March*.” 15 February, 2021, @auratazadimarch.

hand is gloved instead of just being a simple hand is an indication that these notions are harmful. Also, the structure of the image is top down, then back up again. We are led to the yellow words beside the stark black hands at the top, then down to the papers, then to the fire-bin, and then the colors of the fire bring us back up to the papers and to the top. We are kept on message because our eyes are led up and down and up the image, keeping the message focused and direct. The top-down structure, bold colors, and lack of any patterns etc. emphasize the fact that that there is no going around the straightforward message: get rid of outdated notions and save the country from deteriorating.

Iconically the signs are the three black words on the papers being thrown out: “patriarchy, misogyny, and transphobia” refer to the three major societal issues in our country. In relation to the indexical signs, the yellow heading in the top left corner: “Disinfect your country” urges us to get rid of outdated traditional hierarchies that are detrimental to different social groups in our country. It does this by illustrating that these traditional notions are hurting our country as is shown by the act of burning them and by the fact that the hand that is throwing is gloved rather than just a normal hand indicating that these notions are vile and unpleasant.

As a result, the semiotic signs of the poster in Figure 31 showcase the fact that there needs to be changes made in the socio-political and cultural attitudes of the country. It illustrates that sticking to outdated patriarchal norms will only hinder the prosperity and development of our country. Hence urging the viewers to move towards a more inclusive and equitable future by showing that we need to get rid of outdated male dominated notions and prejudices that are plaguing our country. The term “disinfect” is a clear indication of the fact that the current prejudiced notions are harming rather than benefiting the country.



Figure 32: "Poster about Forced Conversions" produced for *Aurat March*. 4 March. 2021, @auratmarch.

In Figure 32 the image shows several hands of varying skin colors in the midst of breaking chains. Some hands are also enclosed in a fist in a sign of protest. There is big letter F on the top right of the poster and a logo at the bottom. For symbolic signs, in the poster in Figure 32 the silver, red, and golden chains stand for the oppressive nature of the treatment that religious minorities face in Pakistan. Eight different arms with varying skin tones,

henna designs, and bangles, are reaching out to break these chains. This points to the fact that the religious minorities in Pakistan are not a homogenous whole but are heterogenous and have their own unique identities. And even though different groups in Pakistan might share same social values or customs such as wearing henna or bangles they are fundamentally part of different ethnic or religious identities such as Hindus, Christians, Sikhs etc.

As regards the iconic signs, the big orange F stands for forced conversions, considering the arms of different ethnic groups reaching out to break the chains i.e., oppression of minority groups. Forced conversions are a form of ethnic violence in Pakistan whereby ethnic and religious minorities are forced to convert to the majority religion that is Islam. A common way of forced conversions in Pakistan is through forced marriages of young girls from ethnic minorities (Ispahani and Alam). The chains and hands serve iconic meaning too as they represent the actual holding back, imprisonment in systems people have not consented to, or being enchained in situations

unfairly, while the hands represent the multitude of people who are in this situation, all of whom want out of the situation. Indexically, the white placard on a stick reading: “End Forced Conversions” highlights that the focus of this poster is on forced conversions and the efforts being made to fight against this inequality. Also, the F is indexical of the entrapment and eventual freedom of the people in the poster as it creates a sense of 3-d space, is surrounded by chains and reaching hands, and is close to the point where the chains break.

Therefore, the semiotic signs in poster of Figure 32 bring our attention to the very important issue of forced conversions in Pakistan. The poster grabs the focus of the reader and prevents them from feigning ignorance towards the crimes and injustices being done against the religious and ethnic minorities in our country. And it calls for efforts to be made to prevent these injustices from repeating.

For the poster attached in the Figure 33 the image displays three women in Balochi clothing standing together. There is text at the top of the poster. We can see the symbolic signs in the form of the stern facial expressions of the women in the poster. Also, rather than flowers or light pastel colors, bright orangish red and blue colors are used to drive the point that the issue being brought to attention needs to be dealt with direly. While the iconic signs of the poster include the attire of the three women in the poster who are seen wearing traditional Balochi clothing. It means that the issue

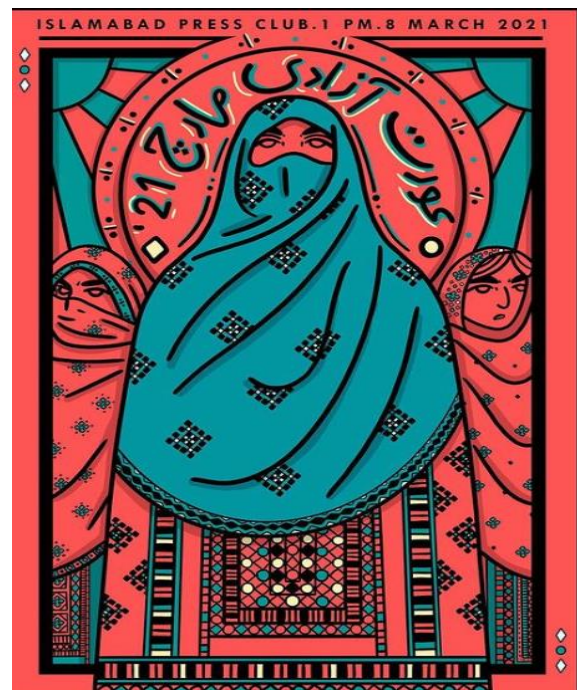


Figure 33: “Poster about enforced disappearances of Balochi Women produced for *Aurat March*.” 25 February. 2021, @auratazadimarch.

being discussed in the poster pertains to Balochi women: the role of Balochi women who are a victim of enforced disappearances of their loved ones. Enforced disappearances is a persistent issue in Balochistan, a province in Pakistan (Badshah et al. 2026). It involves kidnapping or disappearance of mostly influential political activists, human rights activists, or students.

Indexically, there is textual information at the top of the poster which relays the location, date and time of the *March* taking place that year: “Islamabad Press Club, 1 pm, 8th March 2021”. And behind the figure of the middle woman like a halo there is text in Urdu as well. It reads: *Aurat Azadi March 21* “Aurat Azadi March 21” and mentions the year of the *March*. Also, the way that the three women are standing together displays solidarity and strength that women in this community have displayed in face of the torture, kidnapping, and killings of their loved ones. Rather than being defeated they have been sharing their experiences to make people aware of their suffering and have not given up on finding their family members (Badshah 2032). It alludes to the space they have occupied for themselves to have their voices heard through political activism.

The semiotic signs of the poster in Figure 33 altogether brings light to the pertinent issue of enforced disappearances of Balochis in Pakistan. The poster as a result illuminates the fact that the issues faced by minority communities deserve the same kind of recognition that is given to other societal issues in the *March*. And that these communities need to be given the required support and services that they need in order to resolve their issues. It also highlights the role that women play in response to the disappearance of their loved ones, in the form of the protest and social activism that they do to fight against this injustice.

In poster in Figure 34 the image consists of a woman pointing at the board and addressing a group of young girls, in what appears to be a classroom set up. There is text on the board. For

the symbolic signs, the fact that the room depicted is small and has a bookshelf and a painting on the wall implies that this classroom has been set up in someone's own home rather than in a school setting. Implying lack of proper schools and education services in the area. Also, from the ribbons

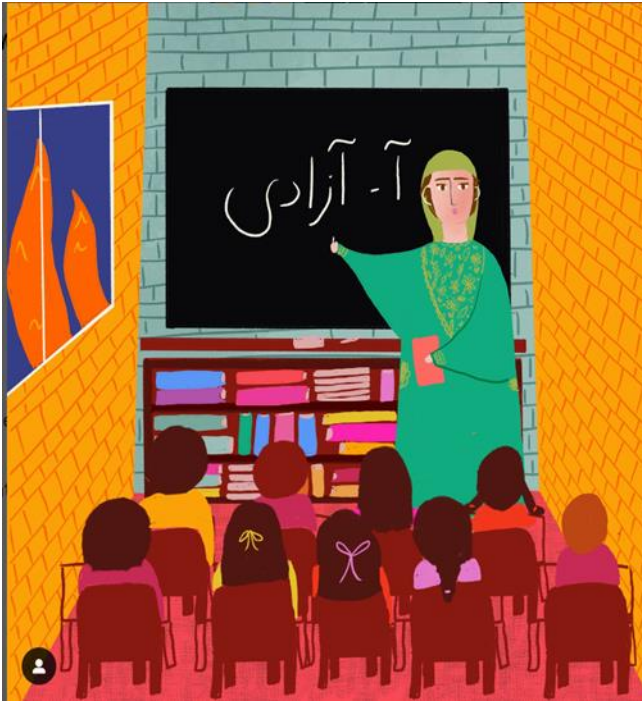


Figure 34: "Poster about education for young girls produced for *Aurat March*." 5 February, 2022, @auratamarchlahore.

and braids in the hair of some of the kids we can assume that this is a representation of young girls. This means that girls are less likely to attend schools than boys, hinting at cultural norms that prevent girls from getting education. And since the drawing style of the poster is synonymous with fairy or folk tales, it illustrates that the main focus of the poster is children's learning. Altogether this illustrates efforts being made locally to provide education to young girls. For the iconic signs, the traditional clothing of the teacher hints at the

fact that this could be a rural area with less access to schools and education for young girls. And the fact that the yellow side walls seem to be closing in on the girls indicates the limited resources and lack of suitable conditions for education of young girls.

With respect to the indexical signs, the Urdu letters on the makeshift blackboard: *A – Azadi/* "Freedom" illustrate that with the help of this poster attentions is being drawn to the need for freedom of young girls in getting good quality education that they are often denied in rural areas of Pakistan. Also, the fact that image sort of draws the viewer towards the central figure of the

teacher highlights the crucial role that teachers play in working towards better education for young girls.

The semiotic signs of the poster in Figure 34 make the viewers focus on the lack of proper education services for young girls in Pakistan especially in remote areas of the country. The fact that the walls appear to be closing in in the poster is a reference to the need for intervention before the situation gets worse. And by depicting a scene from a pseudo classroom in someone’s house and the figure of the women teacher this poster highlights the important role of teachers and the efforts being made on a local level to further girls’ education. The focus on the word *Azadi* “Freedom” on the blackboard illuminates why education for young girls is so important: for their empowerment. Yet there has to be improvement in terms of education provision and resources for the benefit of children and teachers alike.

In Figure 35 the image shows a group of faceless people in different clothing. They are holding placards with symbols on them. There is text on both vertical ends of the poster. The symbolic signs are present in the shape of the five different symbols presented in the top five white placards held by the people in the poster that appear to be linked to their religious affiliation¹⁸. The fact that they have varying skin tones means that this is to represent them being from different religious/cultural

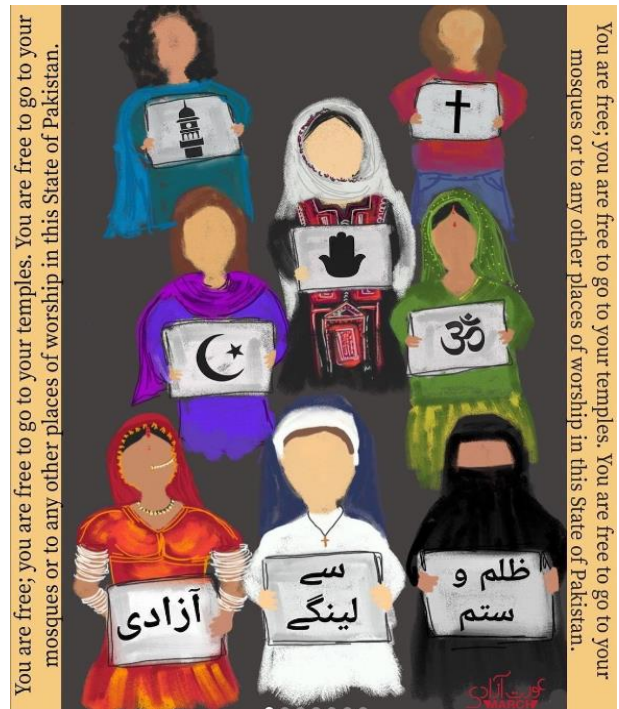


Figure 35: Poster about Religious Discrimination produced for *Aurat March*.” 7 March. 2021, @auratazadimarch.

¹⁸ There is not enough information about the five symbols in this poster for me to provide more detail, but the text on the poster and the attire of the people on the poster lead me to believe that these symbols could be representative of their religious affiliation.

minorities. Their faces are erased in an attempt to put emphasis on the fact that their religious identity is often used to define them entirely. In reference to the iconic signs, their wearing different traditional attire from shalwar kameez, jeans and t-shirt, Balochi dress, Sindhi dress, Church attire and *abaya*¹⁹ further emphasizes that they are from different religious groups in the country.

Lastly, when we look at the indexical signs, the three white placards at the bottom of the poster read: *Zulm o Sitam sae Lenge Azadi* “We will take freedom from oppression”. This, coupled with the statement in English that lines the vertical borders of the poster and is highlighted in a mustard color: “You are free; you are free to go to your temples. You are free to go to your mosques or to any other places of worship in this State of Pakistan”, which is a very popular quote made by the Founder of Pakistan Muhammad Ali Jinnah during the inception of the country, highlights the dichotomy between how the religious minorities in the country should be treated versus how they are being treated right now.

This poster and its semiotic signs illustrate the hardships experienced by religious minorities in Pakistan. For instance, they are persecuted based on their religious place of worship and face extreme violence in the form of abductions, sexual assault, and forced conversions of young people especially girls. This poster encourages people to fight against these injustices and provide better treatment to the country’s minorities.

In image 36, there are three women using shields to block the spraying of a liquid (i.e., acid) that is being thrown at them. There is a big letter A on the poster, text on top of the shields, and a logo at the bottom. Starting with the symbolic signs of the poster in Figure 36, the shields being held by the three women in the poster against the acid that is being thrown at them represents

¹⁹ Traditional Muslim attire.

the women’s movement in Pakistan’s fight against the acid attacks that a lot of young girls are terrorized with when they reject a man’s advances. The dark blue scribbled background is an indication of the darkness that is constituent of the lives of the young girls who have to live in constant fear of the possibility of an acid attack when rejecting someone. And the fact that the dark background is scribbled rather than being flatly black indicates the incessant nature of these attacks, that is they are not a few random incidents but a systemic form of violence that is used to control and discipline women (Mubashar and Mir). It is important to note also that most of the victims of acid attacks are women.



Figure 36: “Poster about Acid Attacks produced for *Aurat March*.” 27 February, 2021, @auratmarch.

For the iconic signs, the two bottles in the bottom right corner and the liquid being sprayed denotes that act of acid attack that is a form of a severely violent retaliation towards girls from men who have been rejected by them. The shields, along with their symbolic meaning, also iconically stand for the activist work that women do to fight against these attacks (*The Guardian*). The Capital red A in the top left corner of the poster is for Acid Attacks. In terms of the indexical signs for the poster, the red letters

on the three shields collectively read: Stop acid attacks, *Bas Karo!* “Stop it”. This shows that women have taken a stance against this injustice and are fighting for the freedom of saying no to a man without any impending consequence. In the bottom left of the poster we also see the logo

of *Aurat March*. The organization of the figures beside each other and the logo, shows solidarity of women supporting each other.

The semiotic signs of the poster in Figure 36 bring attention to a very prevalent form of gender-based violence against women in Pakistan that is acid attacks. The poster works towards creating awareness about this issue and highlighting the fact that this kind of discrimination against women needs to be stopped and they need to be given the support and freedom to say no. The ample acid in the poster shows the severity of the attacks, the resistance of women in the poster and the fact that they are fighting against the attacks themselves, along with the darkness in the poster indicates that even in these bleak circumstances women stand together in the fight against acid attacks from assailants.

In Figure 37, there are four women standing with their backs to each other. One of them has the scale of justice in her hands. There is text at the bottom of the poster. With reference to symbolic signs it is evident that the four different figures of the women in the poster who are aligned together from the top to the bottom of the poster represent different women who have been adversely effected by patriarchal and misogynistic societal biases. One is wearing a *hijab*²⁰, one has a mole near her chin and two



Figure 37: “Poster about women’s solidarity produced for *Aurat March*.” 25 February. 2022, @auratmarchlahore.

²⁰ Head covering.

have different hairstyles indicating that they are all images of different women. Three of the women have a crestfallen and defeated expressions with tears in their eyes while one has an angry expression illustrating how women react differently towards injustice. Also, the fact that the entire poster is black and off white without any bold colors or symbols allows us to focus more on their different expressions while simultaneously noticing what unites them together: the shared difficulties of womanhood.

In relation to iconic signs, the scale of justice in the hands of the young woman at the bottom of the poster alludes to the fight for justice that is the primary focus of *Aurat March*. And the fact that the larger figures seem to be hugging the smaller ones, that they are holding each other is also they form relations of care, concern, support and standing for each other in the face of oppression. Also, for the indexical signs the statement in Urdu at the bottom of the poster: *Mere andar ki har aurat insaf ki muntazir hae* “Each woman inside me is waiting for justice”. This highlights that the fight for justice in *Aurat March* is not about one woman’s singular experience but is for women from different kinds of religious, social, and ethnic backgrounds as well.

The semiotics signs of the poster in Figure 37 work to illustrate the solidarity between women from different social, ethnic, and religious backgrounds in our community who are striving towards justice for themselves and for other women as well. And it points out to the viewers the determination and tenacity of these women, calling them to join in their fight as well.

In Figure 38 the image shows two women holding each other and looking upwards. Newspaper clippings form the background of the poster and bodies of women as well. There is text at the bottom of the poster. In terms of the symbolic signs the two women embracing each other shows that they are providing support to each other and highlights women’s solidarity. For

the iconic signs the background of the poster along with the body of the two women is entirely made up of newspaper articles alerting people about countless cases of gender-based, sectarian, and ethnic violence against women from different minority communities in Pakistan. Also, the fact that they are the women in the poster are looking upwards with hopeful and optimistic expressions is indication of the fact that they are looking towards a better future for themselves.

Indexically, in this poster the text that is readable consists of the headline in white Urdu at the top: *Asal Insaaf Kia hae?* “What is True Justice?”. This puts emphasis on the discussion around finding practical results and solutions to deal with the extreme everyday violence that is inflicted

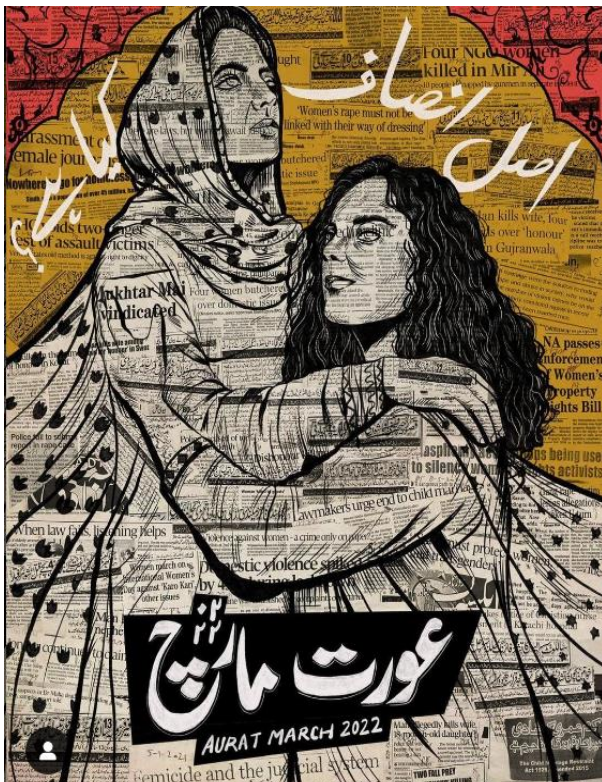


Figure 38: “Poster about women’s solidarity produced for *Aurat March*.” 26 February, 2022, @auratmarchlahore.

on women. Also, at the bottom of the poster highlighted in black are letters in Urdu and English which mention the year of the March: *Aurat March 2022*, *Aurat March 2022*. The semiotic signs of the poster in Figure 38 do two things: they show women’s solidarity towards each other and their hope for a better future. And call out the viewers to work towards comprehensive measures for women’s safety in terms of lawmaking and policies involving women’s health and safety and ensuring that these laws and policies are being implemented and leading to viable results.

In Figure 39, the image displays a group of women standing together. There are placards present behind the group, and there is text on top and on bottom of the poster. For the symbolic signs of the poster the placards held by the people in the background along with two hands holding

the placards in the bottom corners of the poster we can see that this represents a protest setting. In addition, the people in the poster standing in a relaxed and casual manner is symbolic of the fact that there has been a certain level of alleviation of their issues, and they are confident that their demands will be heard. In terms of the iconic signs, the five women in the poster from varying age groups, skin tones, and physical ability illustrates the fight for rights and justice for various social groups and religious groups in society. One of the women's shirts reads:

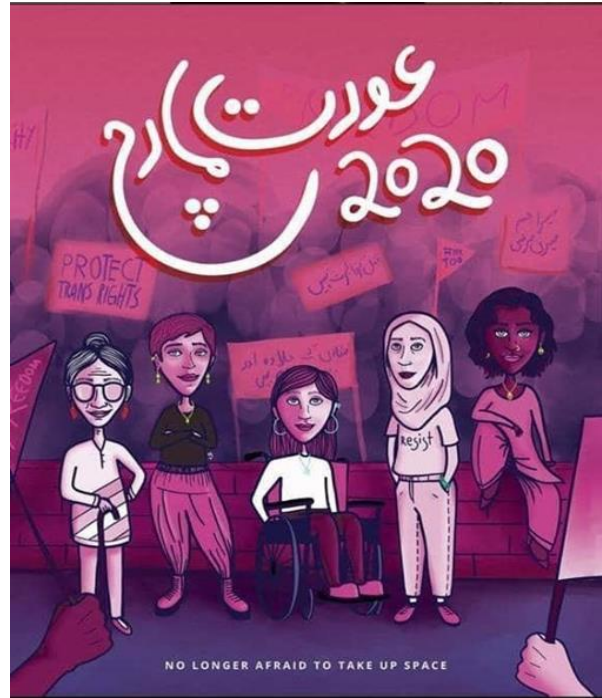


Figure 39: “Poster about women’s movement produced for *Aurat March*.” 25 February, 2020, @auratmarchlahore.

“Resist” indicating that these women are here to demand justice. Also, the fact that style of the figures in the poster is a little modern or cartoon like compared to most of the other posters of the *March* and that the focus of this poster is on inclusion is iconic of representation of different minority groups rather than just focusing on a limited perception of what the communities in Pakistan look like.

Looking at the indexical signs of the poster, placards in the background contain slogans that represent different movements within the *March* to highlight varied struggles and experiences. Some of them (which are readable) are as follows. From left to right the first one reads: “Protect Trans Rights” in relation to the struggles of the transgender community. The small triangular placard reads: “#MeToo” in relation to the #MeToo movement in Pakistan. And the one in the

very right of the poster reads in Urdu: *Mera Jism Meri Marzi* “My Body My Choice” which is a popular slogan of the *March* in relation to women’s fight for bodily autonomy.

The different signs of the poster in Figure 39 showcase the fact that there has been some kind of progress towards the cause of justice towards women and minority communities. There are steps that have been taken, which is reflected by the relaxed stance of the people in the protest. Also, they enunciate the movement’s spreading out and inclusion of demands of different minority communities as well.

In terms of Figure 40, the image consists of a colorful landscape with several women in it.

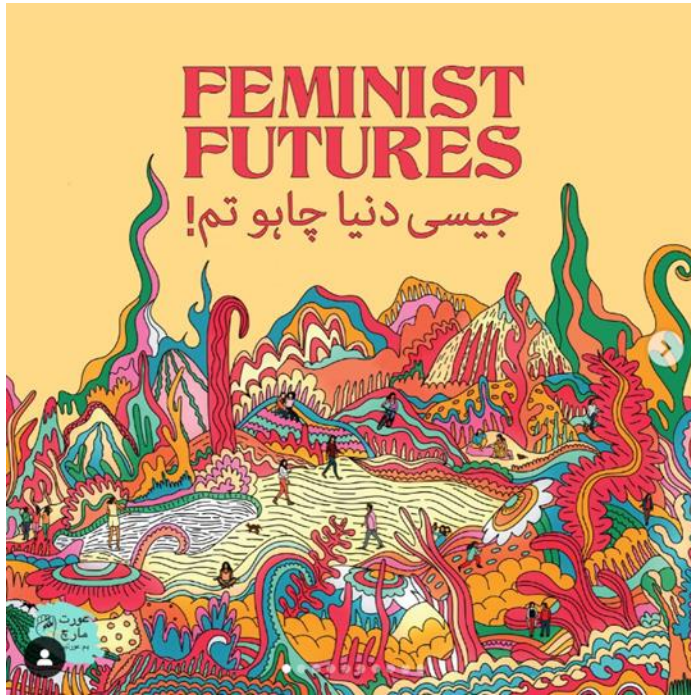


Figure 40: “Poster about Feminist Futures produced for *Aurat March*.” 7 February. 2022, @auratmarch.

There is text on top of the poster and a logo in the bottom left corner. The depiction of a colorful natural landscape is symbolic of the kind of innovative, free, and colorful future that the women’s movement envisions for women of Pakistan. The bright bold colors of the poster and the landscape along with lots of ferns, flowers, hills, and a pond hint at the peace and calmness that women desire as part of their future. Iconically, this poster

includes the various activities that women in this poster are involved in i.e. walking with friends, meditating, walking by themselves, walking a dog, cycling, sitting with a friend, going on a picnic with a friend, taking a selfie, running. The ability to carry out all of these seemingly mundane activities without the threat of surveillance,

catcalling, gender-based physical or sexual violence etc. is what is part of the future that feminists are fighting to achieve for the women in our country.

With regards to indexical signs of the poster the heading: “Feminist Futures” in bold orange brings light to the fact that this poster is a depiction of the feminist future that we are fighting for. Also, “Feminist Futures” is a hint at the work of feminists to prevent a repetition of the past considering working towards feminist futures implies futures that do not consist of the inequalities of the past (Ahmed 236). The tagline in orange Urdu: *Jaisi dunya chaho tum!* “Whichever world you want!” hints at the endless possibilities that could be available for women and other communities in the future if we are successful in our efforts towards fighting for justice and equality in our country.

The semiotic signs of the poster in Figure 40 illustrate the hope for a better future where women can live without the fear of violence, oppression, or alienation. Also, it simultaneously brings the viewers to the understanding that this future will only be possible if we work hard for it, asking us to fight for such a future for ourselves and for the people in our lives.

Overall, the posters in this chapter work towards creating an understanding of the specific socio-political issues faced by minority communities in Pakistan. Some of the posters highlight the plight of ethnic and religious minorities in forms of the violence that they face due to their faith and culture such as lack of freedom in terms of worship, forced conversions, and disappearances of Balochi women. Others depict the lack of freedom of women and differently abled people in terms of lack of bodily autonomy, gender-based violence, misogyny, and sexism. There are some posters which also show that there is still hope for a better future. They attempt this by calling out the viewers for their support towards alleviating the horrible circumstance of minorities in Pakistan, through an acknowledgment of the fact that these violences and discriminations exist,

have adverse effects on the lives of people belonging to such minority groups, and through active participation in making this country a safe place.

The visual semiotic analysis goes a step further than just a textual or a visual analysis and allows for the interpretants of the signs of these posters to gain insight into the pain of different minorities in the Pakistani community. It does this by bringing together key concerns and showing that the absence of freedoms and justice is ubiquitous for various socio-ethnic, religious, and gender minorities in the country. Also, the posters from *Aurat March* about minority groups refer to not just the everyday problems of minorities but the underlying systematic issues that are the cause of these problems. The fact that there is representation of a range of different minority groups is integral to *Aurat March* and one of the major reasons why it is different from previous protest movements in Pakistan.

Conclusion

My feminist visual semiotic analysis of protest art from *Aurat March* - primarily posters but a few examples of street art as well - presents the lived realities of different cultural, religious, ethnic, and gender minorities in Pakistan. Through my analysis of protest art, I have illustrated the numerous hardships and challenges faced by these groups, the discrimination that they face due to their gender or religious/ethnic identity, and the different ways their identities are used against them to police and alienate them. Also, it is important to note that though posters have been used in the past in other marches and political movements in Pakistan, the posters and street art for *Aurat March* are different because such kind of representation of different social groups and their specific issues is not present in other marches. It is through the offline and online space created by the posters and placards of *Aurat March* that people are able to challenge dominant norms and gender roles of the Pakistani society (Kamal 219), and *Aurat March* has gained visibility and recognition.

The posters and street art encourage people to participate in the *March*, and either present their individual concerns or support the collective theme of the *March* that year. It is this expansive and participatory nature of the *March* and its protest art that has empowered people to show up at *Aurat March* offline and online to talk about a multitude of gender-based injustices and inequities. If you are unable to attend the *March*, you can still look at the images of the *March* available online and look at people holding posters that they made themselves or posters that they printed from the social media pages of *Aurat March* to get insight into the kinds of representation of specific socio-political and gender-based issues at the *Marches*. The fact that other than people from middle and upper classes of Pakistan, people from diverse backgrounds including students from marginalized areas, women from informal settlements (slums), women doing minority work, women

representing labor unions and trans-activists, and people from diverse religions, genders, and ethnicity take part in the *March* is an indication to of its participatory nature (Batool et al. 321). Also, *Aurat March* is a movement that is still growing in face of heavy backlash and opposition and continues to encourage people to participate in it each year.

There are people who still consider *Aurat March* as a western agenda or as a movement for the urban and elite Pakistani women and think that the posters from the *March* are vulgar and irrelevant to their lives. A lot of anger at the posters and the street art from the *March* present online on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, is due to the fact that they bring attention to structural issues, such as female genital mutilation, honor killings, acid attacks, enforced disappearances, and forced conversions in Pakistani society. The fact that these issues that have not been brought up before in such a visible manner²¹ and in front of large audiences offline and online, is what makes the posters and street art from *Aurat March* radical and different from other social and political movements or protest art in Pakistan.

A feminist visual semiotic analysis is important in this context because it functions as a tool to deal with the difficulty of expressing things that cannot be easily explained. It does this by using the triadic model of sign, object, and interpretant to look at symbolic, iconic, and indexical signs in the posters and street art from *Aurat March* and by conveying how these signs come together to send certain messages to the audience of the posters. The reason why I have used a feminist visual semiotic analysis instead of other forms of analyses to convey the messages of these posters and street art is mainly because such an analysis provides critical tools for considering women's neglected, overlooked, and suppressed modes of expression. Also, it is helpful in

²¹ Figure 7 for instance shows a very graphic depiction of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), and the fact that FGM is a taboo topic in Pakistani society is what makes the poster in Figure 7 so controversial.

examining how subjectivities are always in a process of becoming and changing through sign relationships (Hurley 787). In relation, a feminist visual semiotic analysis in place of a visual semiotic analysis is important because it takes into account the fact that subjectivity, identity, and positionality is not fixed, and allows us to consider the lived experiences of the people in the poster.

Moving on, these posters present the viewers with actionable information that can be used to take key measures that lead towards better conditions for women, ethnic and religious minorities in the country. This could take the form of safe public spaces for women, changes in attitudes towards sexual assault survivors and domestic abuse survivors, accountability from the perpetrators of assault, equitable pay and better working conditions for women, healthcare officials and low wage workers, appreciation of unpaid domestic labor, safe work environments, better healthcare services for women, provision of affordable and accessible healthcare resources, eradicating difference in attitudes towards men and women's pain, protecting ethnic and religious minorities from faith or regional violence, throwing away outdated patriarchal and discriminatory attitudes towards minority groups, and lastly, by working towards a more inclusive and safe future for ourselves and for other members of the society as well.

Consequently, protest art in form of posters and street art from the *Aurat March* and their subsequent feminist visual semiotic analysis is helpful in elucidating the focus of the *March* as a movement, the efforts being made, and the steps being taken to address certain socio-political issues. The various posters under the topics of Gender-based violence, Women's labor, Women's health, and Freedoms and Justice are helpful in depicting majority of systematic socio-political issues plaguing our country such as lack of access to public spaces for women, sexism, and misogyny, policing of women, inadequate sexual and reproductive health facilities, and lack of bodily autonomy for example. This analysis allows for an understanding of the specific socio-

political, economic, and gender-based issues of Pakistani people, and the need for this movement. *Aurat March* has opened discussions around issues that were considered taboo and it has given women and people from diverse religions, genders, and ethnicity, the reigns to lead discussions around their rights as active participants rather than listening to decisions being made for them.

Works Cited

Ahmed, Sara. "Feminist Futures." *A Concise Companion to Feminist Theory*, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2003, pp. 236–54, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470756683.ch12>.

Alam, Zainab. "Violence Against Women in Politics the Case of Pakistani Women's Activism." *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2021, pp. 21–46, <https://doi.org/10.1075/jlac.00052.ala>.

Anderl, Felix. "Global or Local Solidarity? That's the Wrong Question: Relationality, Aspiration and the in-Between of Feminist Activism in Southeast Asia." *Globalizations*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2022, pp. 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2020.1838759>.

Arif, Anaam et al. "Maternal and perinatal death surveillance and response in Baluchistan, Pakistan-causes & contributory factors of maternal deaths." *Population Medicine*, vol. 5, no. Supplement, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.18332/popmed/165020>.

Arnold, Dana. *Art History: a Very Short Introduction*. Second edition., vol. 102., Oxford University Press, 2020.

Asher, Saira. "Aurat March: Pakistani Women Face Violent Threats Ahead of Rally." *BBC News*, BBC, 7 Mar. 2020, www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-51748152.

Atkin, Albert. "Peirce's Theory of Signs." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 4 Aug. 2022, plato.stanford.edu/entries/peirce-semiotics/.

"'Aurat March' 2021 Presents Feminist Healthcare Manifesto in Pakistan." *Global Voices*, 15 Mar. 2021, globalvoices.org/2021/03/14/aurat-march-2021-presents-feminist-healthcare-manifesto-in-pakistan/.

Awcock, Hannah. "Stickin' It to the Man: The Geographies of Protest Stickers." *Area (London 1969)*, vol. 53, no. 3, 2021, pp. 522–30, <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12720>.

Badshah, Ikram, et al. "Voices of Dissent and the Political Activism of Left behind Females of Baloch Enforced Disappeared Persons." *Elementary Education Online*, vol. 20, no. 4, 2021, pp. 2926-2937, <https://doi:10.17051/ilkonline.2021.04.333>.

Baig, Mirza Altamish Muhammad, et al. "Domestic Violence Amid COVID-19 Pandemic: Pakistan's Perspective." *Asia-Pacific Journal of Public Health*, vol. 32, no. 8, 2020, pp. 525–26, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1010539520962965>.

Bal, Mieke, and Norman Bryson. "Semiotics and Art History." *The Art Bulletin (New York, N.Y.)*, vol. 73, no. 2, 1991, pp. 174–208, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3045790>.

Bal, Mieke. *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*. University of Chicago Press, 1999.

Batool, Sumera, et al. "The struggle for women rights: A study of emergence of feminism in Pakistan, (1947 to 2010)." *Journal of the Punjab University Historical Society*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2018, pp. 211-221.

Batool, Syeda Mujeeba, and Aisha Anees Malik. "Bringing the Focus Back: Aurat March and the Regeneration of Feminism in Pakistan." *Journal of International Women's Studies*, vol. 22, no. 9, Bridgewater State College, 2021, p. 316–330.

Bhatti, Haseeb. "Noor Mukadam Murder: Zahir Jaffar Approaches SC against IHC Verdict Upholding Death Sentence." *DAWN.COM*, 16 Apr. 2023, www.dawn.com/news/1747988.

BROWN, David, et al. "VISUAL DIMENSIONS OF PROTEST: THREE EXAMPLES FROM THE BALKANS." *Knowledge Cultures*, vol. 5, no. 5, 2017, pp. 69–95, <https://doi.org/10.22381/KC5520175>.

"Capturing the Lives of Pakistan's Water Carriers." DAWN.COM, 28 Oct. 2015, www.dawn.com/news/1215909.

Carlson, Bronwyn, et al. *Indigenous Peoples Rise Up: The Global Ascendency of Social Media Activism*. 1st ed., Rutgers University Press, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.36019/9781978808812>.

Casas, Andreu, and Nora Webb Williams. "Images That Matter: Online Protests and the Mobilizing Role of Pictures." *Political Research Quarterly*, vol. 72, no. 2, 2019, pp. 360–75, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912918786805>.

Chughtai, Alia. "Pakistani Women March for Equality, Gender Justice." *Al Jazeera*, 8 Mar. 2019, www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/3/8/pakistani-women-hold-aurat-march-for-equality-gender-justice.

Cohen, Cathy J., and Sarah J. Jackson. "Ask a Feminist: A Conversation with Cathy J. Cohen on Black Lives Matter, Feminism, and Contemporary Activism." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 41, no. 4, 2016, pp. 775–92, <https://doi.org/10.1086/685115>.

Dossa, Shama. "The Aurat March: Women's movements and new feminisms in Pakistan." *Routledge Handbook of Gender in South Asia*. Second edition., Routledge, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003043102>.

Doyle, Jennifer, and Amelia Jones. "Introduction: New Feminist Theories of Visual Culture." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 31, no. 3, 2006, pp. 607–15, <https://doi.org/10.1086/499288>.

Duncum, Paul. "Visual Culture: Developments, Definitions, and Directions for Art Education." *Studies in Art Education*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2001, pp. 101–12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00393541.2001.11651691>.

Fonow, Mary Margaret, and Judith A. Cook. "Feminist Methodology: New Applications in the Academy and Public Policy." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 30, no. 4, The University of Chicago Press, 2005, pp. 2211–36, <https://doi.org/10.1086/428417>.

Fotopoulou, Aristeia. "Introduction: Conceptualizing Feminist Activism and Digital Networks." *Feminist Activism and Digital Networks: Between Empowerment and Vulnerability*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp. 1-35, <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-50471-5>.

Gunaratnam, Yasmin, and Carrie Hamilton. "The Wherewithal of Feminist Methods Introduction." *Feminist Review*, no. 115, 2017, pp. 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41305-017-0023-5>.

Gwiazda, Emily. "Red Dress Day". *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 19 September 2022, *Historica Canada*. www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/red-dress-day.

Hadi, Abdul. "Patriarchy and Gender-Based Violence in Pakistan." *European Journal of Social Sciences Education and Research*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2017, p. 297–, <https://doi.org/10.26417/ejser.v10i2.p297-304>.

Hamdani, Kazim. “Explainer: Why Is the Aurat March so Controversial?” *The Express Tribune*, 22 Feb. 2021, tribune.com.pk/story/2285540/explainer-why-is-the-aurat-march-so-controversial.

Hartley, Lisa K., et al. “How Activists Respond to Social Structure in Offline and Online Contexts.” *Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 72, no. 2, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2016, pp. 376–98, <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12171>.

Hurley, Zoë. “Arab Women’s Veiled Affordances on Instagram: a Feminist Semiotic Inquiry.” *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2023, pp. 783–802, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1986848>.

Hurley, Zoe, and Zeina Hojeij. “Coming-of-Age of Teenage Female Arab Gothic Fiction: A Feminist Semiotic Study.” *Humanities (Basel)*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2023, p. 19–, <https://doi.org/10.3390/h12010019>.

Hussain, Eyza Irene Hamdani. “Is the Aurat March Too Radical for Pakistan?” *The Gazelle*, 20 March 2021, www.thegazelle.org/issue/199/aurat-march-too-radical-for-pakistan.

Imran, Rahat, and Imran Munir. "Defying Marginalization: Emergence of Women’s Organizations and the Resistance Movement in Pakistan: A Historical Overview." *Journal of International Women's Studies*, vol. 19, no. 6, 2018, pp. 132–56.

International, Minority Rights Group. “From Exclusion to Violence: The Case of Religious Minorities in Pakistan.” *Minority Rights Group*, 23 Aug. 2022, <https://minorityrights.org/2022/08/23/pakistan-forb-2022/>.

Ispahani, Farahnaz, and Elaine Alam. “Forced Conversions Continue to Plague Girls in Pakistan’s Minority Communities.” *Religious Freedom Institute*, 26 Apr. 2023,

religiousfreedominstitute.org/forced-conversions-continue-to-plague-girls-in-pakistans-minority-communities/.

Jalal, Sabeena. “The Lady Health Worker Program in Pakistan - A Commentary.” *European Journal of Public Health*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2011, pp. 143–44, <https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/ckq199>.

Javaid, Maham. “Pakistan’s feminists say will persevere amid increased threats” Al Jazeera, 22 Mar. 2021, www.aljazeera.com/features/2021/3/22/pakistans-feminists-say-will-persevere-amid-increased-threats.

Javaid, Maham. “The (r)Evolution of Feminist Public Art.” *Medium*, 6 Mar. 2021, <https://mahamjavaid.medium.com/the-r-evolution-of-feminist-public-art-fc74367f475>.

Jones, Amelia. “Questionnaire: Visual Studies Now.” *Visual Studies (Abingdon, England)*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2021, pp. 191–94, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2021.1969813>.

Kamal, Daanika R. “Networked Struggles: Placards at Pakistan’s Aurat March.” *Feminist Legal Studies*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2022, pp. 219–33, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10691-021-09480-4>.

Kauffman, L. A. *How to Read a Protest: The Art of Organizing and Resistance*. 1st ed., University of California Press, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1525/j.ctv5cgb88>.

Kądrzycka, Aleksandra Karolina. *I Love Freedom! - The Role of Art in Social Movements: Women’s Strike Protests in Poland 2020*. UiT Norges arktiske universitet, 2022.

Kazmi, Syed Messum Ali, et al. “Victim Blaming, Prior History to Sexual Victimization, Support for Sexually Assaulted Friends, and Rape Myths Acceptance as Predictors of Attitudes Towards Rape Victims in the General Population of Pakistan.” *Egyptian Journal of Forensic Sciences*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2023, pp. 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41935-023-00340-7>.

Keller, Jessalynn. "Making Activism Accessible: Exploring Girls' Blogs as Sites of Contemporary Feminist Activism." *Girlhood and the Politics of Place*, Berghahn Books, 2016, p. 261–78.

Kelly, Meghan. "Mapping Bodies, Designing Feminist Icons." *GeoHumanities*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2021, pp. 529–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2373566X.2021.1883455>.

Khan, Ayesha, et al. "Women and Protest Politics in Pakistan." *Gender and Development*, vol. 29, no. 2-3, Routledge, 2021, pp. 391–410, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2021.1981623>.

Khan, Nawal Aamir. "Victim Blaming Now Ingrained in Our Culture." *The Express Tribune*, 6 Oct. 2022, tribune.com.pk/story/2380265/victim-blaming-now-ingrained-in-our-culture.

Khan, Sana. "Challenges and prospects for women's movements in Pakistan: a case study of Women Action Forum." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, vol. 72, 2011, pp. 1074–81.

Khattak, Sajid Rahman, et al. "Impact of Fear of COVID-19 Pandemic on the Mental Health of Nurses in Pakistan." *Journal of Loss & Trauma*, vol. 26, no. 5, 2021, pp. 421–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15325024.2020.1814580>.

Kristeva, Julia. "Semiotics." *Encyclopedia of Feminist Literary Theory*, 2010.

Leavy, Patricia Lina. "The Feminist Practice of Content Analysis." *Feminist Research Practice*, SAGE Publications, Inc, 2007, p. 222–248, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412984270.n8>.

LEE, THERESA MAN LING. "Rethinking the Personal and the Political: Feminist Activism and Civic Engagement." *Hypatia*, vol. 22, no. 4, 2007, pp. 163–79, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2007.tb01326.x>.

Lentz, Alex, and Melanie L. Buffington. “Art + Politics = Activism: The Work of Ai Weiwei.” *Art Education (Reston)*, vol. 73, no. 1, 2020, pp. 52–58, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043125.2019.1672487>.

Mattoni, Alice, and Simon Teune. “Visions of Protest. A Media-Historic Perspective on Images in Social Movements.” *Sociology Compass*, vol. 8, no. 6, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2014, pp. 876–87, <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12173>.

Mehboob, Shazia. “Calling from home” *TheNews*, 19 Apr. 2020, www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/645699-calling-from-home.

Mehmood, Asif. “Domestic Workers Stuck in Poverty.” *The Express Tribune*, 16 Apr. 2023, tribune.com.pk/story/2412228/domestic-workers-stuck-in-poverty.

Mubashar, Laiba, and Muhammad Wasay Mir. “Acid Attacks: Pakistan’s Worst Social Epidemic.” *Pulitzer Center*, 7 Sept. 2023, pulitzercenter.org/stories/acid-attacks-pakistans-worst-social-epidemic.

Mukhtar, Sonia, et al. “A Public Health Perspective of ‘My Body, My Choice’ in Aurat March of Pakistan: A Crisis of Marital Rape During COVID-19 Pandemic.” *Asia-Pacific Journal of Public Health*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2022, pp. 439–42, <https://doi.org/10.1177/10105395211072500>.

Mumtaz, Khawar. “Advocacy for an End to Poverty, Inequality, and Insecurity: Feminist Social Movements in Pakistan.” *Gender and Development*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2005, pp. 63–69, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552070512331332298>.

Mumtaz, Zubia, et al. "Gender-Based Barriers to Primary Health Care Provision in Pakistan: The Experience of Female Providers." *Health Policy and Planning*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2003, pp. 261–69, <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapol/czg032>.

Nazneen, Sohela, and Awino Okech. "Introduction: Feminist Protests and Politics in a World in Crisis." *Gender and Development*, vol. 29, no. 2-3, 2021, pp. 231–52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2021.2005358>.

"'Now I'm Independent': The Pakistan Beauty Salons Employing Acid Attack Survivors." *The Guardian*, 14 July 2020, www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/jul/14/now-im-independent-the-pakistan-beauty-salons-employing-acid-attack-survivors.

"'Pandemic of Patriarchy': Pakistani Women Defy Threats to Hold March." *The Guardian*, 8 Mar. 2021, www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/mar/08/pandemic-of-patriarchy-pakistani-women-defy-threats-to-hold-march.

Portwood-Stacer, Laura, and Susan Berridge. "Introduction: Privilege and Difference in (Online) Feminist Activism." *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3, Routledge, 2014, pp. 519–20.

Rafi, Noor Usman. "The# MeToo movement and its' impact in Pakistan." *Institute of Business Administration*, 2019, <https://ir.iba.edu.pk/research-projects-msj/34>.

Rehman, Zoya. "Online Feminist Resistance in Pakistan." *Sur: International Journal on Human Rights*, English ed., vol. 14, no. 26, 2017, pp. 151–59.

Saeed, Saqib, Markus Rohde, and Volker Wulf. "ICTs, an alternative sphere for social movements in Pakistan: a research framework." IADIS international conference on E-Society. April 9-12. 2008.

Saifi, Sophia, et al. "Court Frees Brother Who Confessed to Killing Social Media Star Qandeel Baloch." *CNN*, 15 Feb. 2022, www.cnn.com/2022/02/15/asia/pakistan-qandeel-baloch-brother-acquittal-intl-hnk/index.html.

Semetsky, Inna. *Edusemiotics - a Handbook*. Springer Singapore Pte. Limited, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-1495-6>.

Sethi, Mira. "Pakistani Women Are Not All Right." *The New Yorker*, 21 Mar. 2023, www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/pakistani-women-are-not-all-right.

Side, Katherine. "Methods". *Rethinking Women's and Gender Studies*, 2012, pp. 51-64.

Skoric, Marko M. "What is slack about slacktivism." *Methodological and conceptual issues in cyber activism research*, vol. 77, no. 7, 2012, pp. 7-92.

Syyed, Huda. "Lack of Data and Dialogue on Female Genital Mutilation in Pakistan." *Journal of International Women's Studies*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2022, pp. 1–14.

Tariq, Soofia. "Outrage after Pakistan PM Imran Khan Blames Rape Crisis on Women." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 25 June 2021, www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/25/outrage-after-pakistan-pm-imran-khan-blames-crisis-on-women.

Turley, Emma, and Jenny Fisher. "Tweeting Back While Shouting Back: Social Media and Feminist Activism." *Feminism & Psychology*, vol. 28, no. 1, SAGE Publications, 2018, pp. 128–32, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353517715875>

Zahid, Luavut. "These Women Stayed in Abusive Marriages Because Pakistan Failed Them." *DAWN.COM*, 22 Feb. 2017, www.dawn.com/news/1250897

Zia, Afiya S. “Social Media Politics in Pakistan.” *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 47, no. 7,

Sameeksha Trust, 2012, pp. 16–18.