

Aurat March: Pressure group, Interest group or a Social Movement?

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Abstract

Any struggle for rights or reforms aims to influence decision-makers and political elite to achieve desired objectives. It is driven by specific groups or broad coalitions forming influential interest groups, pressure groups or large-scale movements. Each one of them has unique characteristics impacting outcomes. Given the context, assessing the potential success of recent Pakistani women's struggle like the Aurat March demands careful analysis within a defined framework. While Pakistani women's activism is historically established, the Aurat March's artistic campaigns and wide appeal have notably advanced the fight for equal rights. However, its capacity to achieve lasting reforms in a religiously and patriarchally influenced society hinges on understanding its position within the spectrum of interest groups, pressure groups, and social movements. To classify the Aurat March and predict its future trajectory, this article uses content analysis approach to examine the Aurat March's history, evolution, and core objectives of over time, utilizing both primary data (interviews) and secondary data (newspaper articles, journal articles and books).

Keywords: Aurat March, Social Movements, Patriarchy, Pressure Group, Interest Group, International Women's Day, Gender Inequality

Introduction

The history of nonviolent movements and struggles in Pakistan reveals uneven progress in achieving social, political, and economic rights (Imran Sardar, [2022](#)). Women's struggles for rights and equality, particularly, have historically faced greater obstacles and challenges than men's protesting on various issues. They have historically undertaken various initiatives to protect their rights especially during the military regime of 1980s, when they stood up against the discriminatory policies and laws especially the Hudood Ordinance (Hudood Ordinance of 1979, was sought to establish the 'Islamic' system of justice in Pakistan. It intended to bring Pakistani law into conformity with the Islamic injunctions. New criminal offenses of adultery and fornication were introduced, along with severe punishments such as whipping, amputation, and stoning to death. After significant controversy and criticism, parts of this law were extensively revised in 2006 through the Women's Protection Bill. For Asma, it was an attempt to mix the religion into law). The protests started against the Hudood Ordinances right after its implementation in 1979. Women considered the law extremely discriminatory against women and minorities and could be used as a tool of oppression and injustice for them (Mirza, [2011](#)). Asma Jehangir, was among the ones who fought strongly against Hudood Ordinance which she claimed was a deliberate attempt to bring Sharia Law into the legal system, hence putting more restrictions on women already facing challenges of hardcore patriarchal society. (Ayesha Khan, [2021](#)). Their struggles have resulted in some significant reforms over time, and sensitizing the decision makers that includes the judges (Khan, A., Malkani, 2019) but they still face the formidable challenge of dismantling the deeply entrenched patriarchal structures that have resulted in general acceptance by women of several forms of violence especially domestic against them (Ali, [2012](#)). The situation for women of minorities is more precarious as they face additional challenge of religiously-driven policies and laws (Farhana, [2012](#)).

The Aurat March, with its artistic campaigns and broad appeal, is uniquely impactful and sets a new precedent. However, whether this Aurat March would be able to bring significant reforms in society largely depends on understanding the nature of the March. Given that, this article explores whether the Aurat March can be classified as an interest group, a pressure group, or a movement since each classification has important implications for broader societal change that women at large are looking for.

To classify the Aurat March and predict its future trajectory, this article examines the March's history, evolution, and core objectives of the Aurat March over time, utilizing both primary data (interviews) and secondary data (articles). The article is organized into four sections: the first provides a brief introduction to interest and pressure groups; the second discusses the origins and initial objectives of the Aurat March; the third highlights significant developments in the Aurat March to the present day; and the final section evaluates whether the Aurat March functions as a pressure group or an interest group.

Interest Group, Pressure Group and Social Movement: A Theoretical Construct

Interest and pressure groups can effectively hold individuals and organizations accountable in a democracy. They embody the pluralist idea that diverse groups can mitigate political extremes by representing a broad spectrum of interests. At various times, individuals may find opportunities to collaborate and form these groups to pursue collective goals. Engaging in organized lobbying efforts can facilitate the expression of their views. Additionally, these groups often seek to influence policymaking processes and decisions regarding the allocation of crucial resources (Dalziel, R. 2010).

There is often little distinction between pressure groups and interest groups, as both consist of individuals united by common interests. They aim to leverage their collective strength to influence specific decision-makers and organizations to adopt their viewpoints or demands in

the decision-making process. A pressure group can be an interest group that exerts influence or pressure on the government or decision-makers to achieve its certain goals. However, it is important to note that not all interest groups apply pressure in this way. This means that while all pressure groups are considered interest groups, not all interest groups are classified as pressure groups. One could assert that interest groups operate with a more formal structure and a greater degree of leniency in their strategies, in stark contrast to the assertive and often uncompromising nature of pressure groups.

According to Gerard O'Donnell, author of 'Mastering Sociology', pressure groups can be of two types; sectional and promotional. Sectional groups aim to protect or promote the interests of their members or a specific group, while promotional groups focus on achieving particular changes or addressing specific issues. Sectional groups are often called 'protective group' ' because they primarily focus on safeguarding the sectional interests of individuals, often their own members (O'Donnell, G. 1985).

A social movement, on the other hand, aims to create social change and typically arises when there is a clear anomaly within the system. This anomaly often relates to issues of injustice, inequality, or the marginalization of certain groups in society. While social movements, like interest groups, are purposeful and organized endeavors that strive for common goals, they also serve as an umbrella under which various interest and pressure groups collaborate to pursue specific social changes.

According to Edward Gemma, a senior lecturer at the University of Manchester, UK, social movements can be understood through four key conceptual distinctions. First, they represent collective, organized efforts focused on driving social change, as opposed to isolated individual actions. Second, these movements have longevity, engaging in sustained conflict over specific issues against powerful adversaries, rather than being fleeting events. Third, members of social

movements come together, cultivating a shared collective identity that unites their efforts. Finally, social movements actively seek change by strategically employing protests to make their voices heard. (Edwards Gemma, 2014).

The origin of Aurat March

The Aurat March is a feminist movement advocating for gender justice, initiated by young activists in Karachi to commemorate International Women's Day as a public protest against misogyny, patriarchal practices, and widespread gender inequality. It was partly inspired by the 2017 Women's March in the US. Later in the year 2018 similar marches started taking place took place in different parts of the country primarily the urban cities notably Islamabad, and Lahore. These marches drew over great attention and had a greater impact with significant media attention as a feminist movement (Khan, A., Jawed, 2021). After the success of the first march, the organizers recognized that their struggle should be a collaborative effort, free from a single leadership or organization. This approach would amplify voices on a variety of issues, highlighting the interconnectedness of their challenges.

Initially, the Aurat served as the unifying force as various women's rights organizations, including NGOs, and human rights groups, started fostering collaboration and building upon each other's advocacy efforts in this newly formed feminist struggle in Pakistan. Following the significant event of 2018, the dedicated organizers of Aurat March established Hum Aurtein (We Women) with the aim of coordinating urban protests and effectively preparing for the subsequent Marches. This initiative was crucial in ensuring that women's voices were heard and amplified in both urban and rural settings. However, the primary focus has been on the urban educated class.

By the year 2019, the event had significantly broadened its reach, expanding to include six additional cities across the region. This expansion resulted in the gathering of the largest

crowds advocating for gender justice seen in a generation, with participation from a diverse group that included both women and a number of supportive men. The collective demands put forth during that year reiterated several crucial issues, which included a call for an end to all forms of violence, a push for economic justice, the promotion of reproductive rights, the quest for environmental justice, the pursuit of political justice, and affirming everyone's right to the city as a shared space.

As the Aurat March moved into 2020, the movement saw the introduction of three important new elements to its list of demands, reflecting an evolving understanding of social justice issues. These additions focused on the recognition and protection of minority rights, including a call for an end to the forced conversions that affected vulnerable communities. Furthermore, there was an emphasis on increasing political participation not only for women but also for transgender and non-binary individuals, highlighting the necessity for inclusive representation in political discussions and decision-making processes. Additionally, there was a strong push for the elimination of stereotypical media reporting, with the aim of ensuring that all narratives surrounding women's experiences and gender issues are portrayed fairly and accurately.

In 2021, the Aurat March made a more pronounced demands in the form of 15-point agenda addressed to provincial and federal government that included shelter centers for women and children, passing of bill proposed by trans community, and demand to end extrajudicial killing in all the provinces, and release of missing persons. This was the time when the Aurat March began to engage with political issues beyond its broader feminist agenda. In 2022, the Aurat March was dedicated to labor rights. As stipulated in the concept note of 2022 march, they claimed that their work was mental, physical, emotional, whether it was in the production and provision of food, taking care of the elderly, raising and socializing children, or taking care of

the environment and nurturing our communities, and for that, their work must be acknowledged and rewarded fairly.

After undergoing transformative agenda-setting phases, the Aurat March in 2023 returned to its original mandate of confronting and eliminating deep-rooted forms of oppression driven by capitalist ideologies, such as economic exploitation, gender-based violence, militarization, war, and environmental degradation, as outlined in their 2023 Charter of Demands (see Annex for detailed overview). In the 2023 Charter of Demands, they raised their voices for the social security and safety of workers, which have often been neglected. They demanded that all workers—across factories, farms, sanitation, and domestic roles—receive a living wage to secure safe housing, quality education, and affordable healthcare. Immediate enforcement of minimum wage laws with penalties for non-compliance is essential. They called for reduced military spending and redirected savings to support families affected by flooding, alongside immediate relief and rehabilitation for flood victims. The State must provide social security and monthly stipends for women and the khawaja sira community, as per Article 38 of the Constitution of Pakistan, 1973. Addressing bonded labor, especially in Sindh and Balochistan, is crucial, with a demand to close private jails and forgive farmer debt due to the 2022 floods.

They sought shelters for women, khawaja siras, trans men, and non-binary individuals in every Sindh district, along with better funding for existing shelters. The federal government must uphold the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2018, and take action against violence toward this community. They also demanded an end to forced conversions and child marriages in Sindh, as these violate constitutional rights to religious freedom and dignity.

In 2024, the Aurat March demands varied by division. While Karachi's remained consistent, Lahore called for transparency in announcing the 2024 General Election results to restore trust, advocating a public-led truth and reconciliation process. They also demanded

enforcement of the 5% minimum for women's nomination on general seats (raising to 30% or more), quotas for transgender persons, and increased representation for marginalized communities at all governance levels, ensuring inclusivity across gender, class, ability, caste, and faith. Further demands included equitable resource distribution and representation for all federal units, including Gilgit-Baltistan, and prioritizing strengthened local government institutions for grassroots political empowerment. They urged an end to IMF-mandated austerity, demanding restored funding for essential public services and welfare. The Islamabad chapter demanded an end to forced disappearances, urging the state to address demands by Mahrang Baloch and other Baloch women, and to immediately release all illegally detained prisoners. Additional demands included action against cyber harassment, an end to period poverty, economic justice, universal access to education and healthcare, and political rights (Dawn, [2025](#)). The next year, in 2025, the Aurat March demands remained the same for all the divisions. For instance, the Islamabad division raised the key demands included: strengthening workplace sexual harassment committees, ending violence and discrimination against transgender individuals and ensuring gender self-determination, securing girls' education and abolishing forced conversions, repealing the Punjab Defamation Act 2024 and Section 144, restoring student unions, halting agricultural land misuse, and developing anti-smog policies (The News, [2025](#)).

The demands put forth by the Aurat March were especially prominent and forceful in the year 2021, with a particular emphasis on issues surrounding the transgender bill. Activists were vocally urging both the provincial and federal governments to take these pressing concerns seriously and take concrete steps to address them. This strong call to action highlighted the urgency of the situation and the need for immediate legislative attention. However, by the time we reached 2023, the demands presented during the march appeared to be more generalist, lacking the same level of intensity and clarity. The expectations for a definitive roadmap

outlining the necessary actions and changes seemed less pronounced, leading to a perception that the momentum for these issues had diminished, and the focus was less direct in terms of demanding specific governmental intervention and a clear roadmap for broader societal change, and attitude towards women.

The division-wise demands illustrate how Aurat March can sometimes act as a fragmented force, with women from Punjab, Sindh, and other provinces pursuing their own individual causes. While this localized focus is essential for highlighting the unique challenges faced by women experiencing discrimination, it ultimately undermines the perception of Aurat March as a cohesive movement advocating for women's rights across Pakistan. For the cause to gain strength and visibility, a more unified approach is crucial—one that amplifies local voices while standing together in solidarity.

Following a brief overview, the next section critically analyzes the Aurat March's struggle. It examines ambiguities in its political affiliations, explores its campaign strategy (particularly slogans and placards), and addresses leadership and strategic shortcomings within the broader struggle of women. These factors are crucial for understanding the very nature of the women's struggle under the Aurat March banner.

The Challenge of forging Alliances with Potential Stakeholders

Forming coalitions and alliances with like-minded stakeholders is a decisive strategy that can amplify an interest group's policy leverage. Coalitions can also amplify resources like information, and networks by leveraging member strengths. Combined forces also grant interest groups access to exclusive lobbying channels and policymakers, enhancing their influence and recognition. For instance, a coalition of children's rights groups (NACSO, MCE, NSPCC, ECPAT, and Save the Children) actively participated in discussions surrounding the

2009 European Commission proposal to combat sexual abuse of children, and achieved greater projection, acknowledgement and policy input (Iskander De Bruycker, 2014).

With regard to Aurat March, the Pakistan People Party (PPP) leadership's support for the Aurat March helped safeguard against threats from the religious right. Activists from Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM), Lady Health Workers (LHW), and young feminists who initiated the Aurat March have formed associations to evolve their issues into movements. Meanwhile, some feminists linked to the women's movement of the 1980s are focusing on connecting formal politics with activism, encouraging younger activists to pursue this direction as well. However, some activists believe that affiliation especially political affiliation poses more challenges than advantages. For instance, the political affiliations of many LHW hampered their ability to fulfill their demands. As a result, organizers restrict participants from displaying party or organizational banners at events, discouraging political figures from attending or bringing their party members. In a nutshell, there is significant confusion regarding forging affiliation, with some seeking closer ties to parties for greater influence, while others view such affiliations as potentially disruptive to their causes.

Aside from political affiliation, the Aurat March organizers lack a system for forming alliances with similar groups. While many organizations advocating for rights have expressed sympathy and moral support, there are no formal connections established. Thus, this gap represents a strategic flaw in Aurat March struggle.

The Challenge of Acceptability of Aurat March's Demands Across the Society

The demands of the Aurat March are generally recognized among the young, urban and educated class, but the banners displayed during the marches sparked outrage among right-wing conservatives and ignited intense discussions among women's organizations, political parties, and middle-class households regarding gender norms. This debate pushed some public

figures to express their support or opposition to women's demands. Certain demands from the Aurat March fueled a heated public and media discourse, leading some supporters to distance themselves from the urban feminist slogans, including a playful one urging men to cook their own meals. A critic from the lady health workers remarked, "Many actions contradicted our religion and society."

Activists from the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement acknowledged the feminist critiques but argued it was impractical to raise such issues while women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan confront more pressing patriarchal challenges, such as property rights, alimony, and domestic violence (Khan, A., Jawed, A., & Qidwai, K, 2021). They felt that focusing on these more conservative and vulnerable contexts made the Aurat March's coalition-building efforts less effective. Pakistani society, including many women, has struggled to accept women openly denouncing patriarchy and demanding a voice. In recent years, critics have accused marchers of being elitist, detached from grassroots communities, and promoting a Western agenda, while others brand them as a foreign-funded threat to Pakistani tradition (Mariam Azeem, 2020). So, these counterproductive societal attitudes significantly undermine the Aurat March, hindering progress and support for its objectives. These negative perceptions not only harm the women's struggle but also detract from its important message.

The Challenge of Leadership for Furthering Aurat March's Agenda

Leadership plays a critical role in any movement striving for meaningful societal change. In relation to pressure and interest groups, effective leadership is too, essential, as it not only shapes strategies but also ensures their successful execution. Since inception, Aurat March, led by young, predominantly urban and educated Pakistani women, signifies a generational shift in women's activism, boldly challenging societal taboos. The Aurat March is primarily a collective effort of women standing up against widespread discrimination in Pakistan, as

evidenced by the various divisions of the Aurat March operating throughout the country. However, there is no single iconic leader representing this women's struggle. While the Aurat March does have the support and sympathy of several notable figures in Pakistan, it is essentially not led by any one individual.

This leaderless struggle perhaps has both advantages and disadvantages. On one hand, this lack of a central figure allows women from every corner of Pakistan, regardless of caste or religion, to have equal status in the movement and be considered leaders in their own right. On the other hand, this leaderless approach presents significant challenges, as women often face life threats and have been subjected to various legal cases (Dawn, [2025](#)). In these difficult circumstances, the organizers have to seek political support to address the emerging challenges they encounter, and unfortunately, this support is often not equally available to all women. In sum, this leaderless movement can appear to be a weakness rather than a strength for the Aurat March.

The Challenge of Devising a Formidable Strategy to Implement Agenda

The Aurat March in Pakistan is generally viewed as an annual event where women from all walks of life come together on March 8th every year to voice their concerns about the widespread discrimination faced by women in the country. However, in the period between these annual marches, there are no organized activities that demonstrate a clear roadmap for implementing the demands put forth during the previous march. This lack of activity casts a negative shadow over the entire women's struggle. Consequently, the absence of targeted and timely demands hinders the development of the Aurat March into a more robust women's movement in Pakistan. Currently, it stands as an annual gathering with no clear roadmap as one of the organizers from Karachi admitted that "a march cannot fill up an entire movement;

it's on us to do the work of claiming space beyond that one day and one moment of collective protest.” (Hira Azmat, 2022).

Conclusion

The Aurat March is undoubtedly a pivotal moment in the development of feminist resistance in Pakistan, advocating for a contemporary feminist approach that emphasizes equal rights. The momentum it has generated, alongside the backlash and death threats faced by its participants, raises critical questions about the historical construction of sexuality in Pakistan. The Aurat March has opened a dialogue on inclusivity, and gender in Pakistan. However, the scope and intensity of pressure group, interest group, or social movement politics is determined by many factors such as timeframe, targets, and tactics, and more importantly, the leadership. Currently, Aurat March's division-wise demands, while crucial for addressing localized discrimination, can fragment the movement and weaken its overall image as a unified advocate for women's rights across Pakistan. A more cohesive approach, amplifying local voices through national solidarity, is essential for strengthening the cause and increasing its visibility.

Given that, the Aurat March, as it stands today, cannot be termed a pressure group since it is not well-organized and it does not have a specific lobbying system to pressurize the decision makers. Moreover, their demands are wide-ranging and not narrowed as usually we see in the pressure group where it pushes for a specific demand. In relation to interest groups which is a kind of pressure group, the Aurat March slightly falls into this classification as it represents women section of the society and advocating for gender justice, but again, as pressure or interest groups demand active collaboration, active involvement to pursue their shared causes, and pronounced and frequent appearance rather than annual shows, the Aurat March cannot be strictly be called an interest group or a sectional group as classified by Donnell since nothing

significant achievements have made with regard to women in entirety, and also there have not been any consistent policy framework that Aurat March have adopted so far.

In discussions about whether to call it a social movement, the Aurat March, here too, does not strictly fit into this classification according to Gemma Edwards definition of social movement. Currently, it is more of a loosely organized effort rather than a well-coordinated struggle characterized by ongoing action rather than one-off events. Additionally, a key aspect of any movement is its collective identity, as members typically share a sense of unity. In this regard, the Aurat March still has to come a long way as it has yet to foster a collective identity that brings together women from both rural and urban areas and from all sects. This unity is essential for representing a cohesive front advocating for social change. Nevertheless, Aurat March has all the essential ingredients of becoming a radical gender-reform social movement in Pakistan. However, its success, as mentioned earlier, depends on its ability to unite various gender-focused groups, build stronger relationships within and forge alliance with potential stakeholders, a clear strategy with targets, and more importantly raising an iconic leadership. Social media provides Aurat March with a valuable platform to amplify its message and broaden support, an advantage previous movements lacked. However, effective utilization, would be crucial in bringing a broader societal change, and greater acceptability of its demands.

Annex

(Manifesto, Auart March, 2023).

1. *“We demand that all workers, whether working in factories, farms and homesteads, as sanitation workers, or in homes as domestic workers, be given a living wage, based on access to safe housing, quality education and affordable healthcare for themselves and their families. As a first step, we demand immediate enforcement of minimum wage across all sectors, and for all actors who refuse this to be fined under the law.*
2. *We demand a cut in military expenditure with cuts in non-combative expenditure as a first step, and an end to lavish spending like golf clubs, housing schemes and the like. We also ask for a cut in the extravagant benefits of bureaucrats, and the extraneous expenditure of civilian governments, especially by means of duplicate ministries & divisions at the federal and provincial level. We demand this money to be immediately routed to the people of Pakistan, particularly for rehabilitation of flood hit families.*
3. *We demand immediate relief and rehabilitation for the flood affected victims. Right now, where millions are hungry and shelter less across the provinces, we demand from the State, the provision of social security and protection through monthly stipends for all women and the khawaja sira community in view of their basic needs like food, shelter, basic health costs as per Article 38 of the Constitution of Pakistan, 1973.*
4. *We demand that the government take notice of the continuing practice of bonded labour in Sindh & Balochistan a huge number of when are from scheduled caste minority communities. We demand shutting down all private jails and the abolition of this practice as per constitutional guarantees and provincial laws. We further demand from the government that the accumulated debt owed by farmers be forgiven, especially in light of the 2022 floods.*
5. *We demand the establishment of shelters/safe houses and subsidized shelters for women (cis and trans), khawaja siras, trans men and non-binary persons in each district in Sindh. With this, we also demand increased funding for existing Dar-ul-Amansand shelters, and an increase in the number of functional shelters. We further demand improvement in the quality of crisis and shelter services, including the adoption of policies fully consistent with survivors’ freedom of movement.*
6. *We demand that the federal government uphold the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2018 in its original form, including Chapter II section 3, which protects the right for a person to be recognized as transgender as per their self perceived gender identity. We also demand from the government to take action against the escalating violence, including extreme mob violence, which is used to intimidate and murder members of this marginalized community. 7. We demand an end to forced conversions and child marriages in Sindh. These practices violate the constitutional guarantees that protect religious freedom and dignity of persons, and the Sindh Child Marriage Restraint Act 2013”*

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