The Hidden Shadow Pandemic
of Marital Rape During COVID-19
Pandemic Outbreak: A Critical
Role of Women’s March for Awareness
of Rape, Consent, and Sexual and
Reproductive Rights

Sonia Mukhtar¹,²* and Shamim Mukhtar³

Abstract

Introduction: Aurat March—the women’s rights movement has left an indelible imprint on a contradictory ensemble of a revolutionary women’s rights demand in a conventional socializing segment of society. Women’s March is an intersectional, intergenerational and inclusive feminist discourse centrally concerned with the health, education, engagement, advocacy, gender equality, freedom and empowerment. Anecdotal discourse of Aurat March, enacted amidst COVID-19 pandemic, is centrally concerned with achieving space in private and public sphere and equal sexual and reproductive rights in the marriage institution.

Method: A broad research of literature and online database related to marital rape using PsycINFO, PsycNet, PubMed, ERIC, EMBASE, Scopus, Google Scholar and Elsevier was undertaken. Manual searches of the specific intimate partner violence journals (e.g., Journal of Interpersonal Violence, Journal of Family Issues) and news articles were also included.

Result: This analysis provides epistemological and media representation grounds for strategy and intervening analysis on the re-construction of the narrative of semantics of stereotyped gender roles. Further, this paper is embedded in the measure of women’s rights, bodily autonomy, sexual and reproductive rights, differential context of consent between sex and rape within the institution of marriage.

Keywords
COVID-19, Aurat March, feminism, sexual and reproductive rights, marital rape, sexual coercion

Introduction

One is not born, but rather becomes women¹

Aurat March—the unusually historical moment, in which a movement was created—has left the indelible imprint of a cultural contradictory ensemble of a revolutionary women’s rights movement. In aiming the recognition from the privileged and influential establishment while inaugurating the challenge of Aurat movement, this article provides an intervening analysis on the reconstruction of the narrative of feminism in social and cultural contexts. The strength of the narrative offers diversity in the linguistics for comprehension and transformation of various perspectives. The feminist narrative provides constructionist focus to the gendered stories that cultural narratives construct and reconstruct under the impress of identity. Feminism is about the promotion of equality among all genders (all sexual orientations) and their equal rights through apprehension of theory and action based on their individuality and humanity.

Aurat March (Women’s March) of Pakistan is a sociopolitical movement for equality and gender justice

¹ Institute of Clinical Psychology, University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan
² Dulwich Center, Adelaide, Australia
³ College of Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan

Corresponding author:
Sonia Mukhtar, Institute of Clinical Psychology, University of Management and Technology, C-II Block C 2 Phase 1 Johar Town, Lahore, Punjab 54770, Pakistan.
E-mail: sonia.mukhtar12@gmail.com

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demonstrated on International Women’s Day. Aurat March is a platform that seeks to subvert the patriarchal system, dismantle capitalism, deny exploitation of economic instability, redistribute resources between men and women, and claim the restructuring of culture, which stands on the giant shoulders of racism, sexism, sexual slavery, oppression, repression, regression, and male-domination. This is to reemphasize and claim equal rights for women and minorities and aim at transforming state and society attuned toward a movement which is not an antireligious sentiment, Western, antiman, and family-breaking project.

Increasing women’s public visibility facilitates the initiative of reconfiguring public spheres and subsequently cultivates the space for other women. On March 8, 2020 and 2021, amidst of Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic outbreak across the globe, Pakistan’s aurat (women) joined hands in Women’s March. The loss of autonomy, suffering, and vulnerabilities that women are experiencing during the COVID-19 pandemic are not contextual but highly global, which illuminates a wake-up call for feminism for women, family, and community development around the world. A significant increase of violence (child abuse and gender-based violence inflicted upon women, transgender, and nonbinary people), inequality, harassment, oppression, and trauma from physical, sexual, emotional, economic, and psychological abuse during COVID-19 quarantine and social isolation has intensified. Sex crime such as “acquaintance rape, including familial rape stranger rape; gang rape, including corrective-gang rape, drug-facilitated gang rape, pack-hunting rape, women retributive rape (or women vengeance) for violence experienced from men; homophobic rape; prison rape, including transactional rape and gang initiation rape; and armed rape” are also represented. COVID-19-related studies have predicted the surge in mental health issues, psychosocial problems, and emotional-behavioral manifestations including interpersonal violence, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, grief and bereavement, loss/separation from family, helplessness/ hopelessness, ambivalence, substance use/abuse, suicidal ideations, misinfodemics, and other mental health concerns. It is important to note that as per the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Report, Pakistan is antepenultimate and has been placed at 151 out of 153 countries.

Over the last 2 years, Aurat March has been subjected to campaigns against women and their rights. Placards at Aurat March have been used as a tool to display outrage, doctored images, and dis/misinfodemics perpetuating misogynistic and patriarchal ideals. The participants at Aurat March have carried placards that challenge dominant sexist norms and gendered stereotypical roles by referring to autonomy, freedom, and justice. Placards integrated powerful slogans, satire, sarcasm, and humor as a form of cultural critique. In 2019, an Islamic cleric interpreted the slogan Mera jism, meri marzi (My body, my choice) during his sermon as “an open call for fornication and adultery…my body, my choice, your body your choice then men’s body men’s choice; they can climb onto anyone they want.” In 2020, in a talk show on national television, a male screenwriter responded to a female activist’s explanation of slogans, “What is in your body? Who the hell are you? Go look at your body and face—no one even wants to spit on it.” The terrorist group Tehrik-e-Taliban issued threats against Aurat March for “spreading obscenity and vulgarity.”

Pakistan is a patriarchal society where men dominate women in all aspects of life by consolidating authority through social, political, economic, and religious structures/processes. In Pakistan’s patriarchal culture, men’s honor depends on the possession, ownership, and control of wealth (zar), women (zan), and land (zameen). The same structures, dominated by men, do not equally offer personal and social development and legal protections to women and consequently make women more vulnerable to different forms of violence and crime as compared to men. The prevalent and overarching patriarchal culture survives through socialization-acceptance and power which eliminate any chance of protest, resistance, and retaliation from women.

Indoctrination, socialization, and culture conditioned throughout life make women internalize the submissiveness and subordination/obedience to strengthen the gender inequalities and power dynamics within individuals, groups, and social institutions. In this discriminatory social–cultural power structure, women are glorified to be submissive objects of men’s sexual desire while condemning her for having sexual desires which deprived them of their rights, liberty, equality, and human integrity to be as equal as men.

A society obsessed with women where men safeguard family’s honor by controlling women specially controlling their bodies in terms of their sexuality and reproductive ability is shaping the anti-choice and anti-women culture. Thus, when a woman’s existence is perceived as not in the interests of men, her body is punished with beating, burnings, sexual abuse, and murder in the name of “honor.” The reality of a woman as a piece of property, a commodity, or an object is reflected through where her body can be offered as compensation for damages to life (khoon-baha/swara or blood money) and property of other men. The cultural stereotype that the honor of a man lies within women’s bodies and the family’s reputation/morality is bestowed upon women, and that a man can use both physical and sexual force to correct his wife from engaging in actions appearing immoral to him, further culturally invalidate marital rape. The social stereotype that men have an increased urge for sex as compared to women and that on withholding sex by wives they can obtain it forcefully leads to further victim blaming. According to a study, 70% to 90% women in Pakistan are subjected to domestic violence including honor killing, spousal abuse, marital rape, acid attacks, or engineering an accident like the bursting of a kitchen stove. Another study confirmed that domestic violence against women takes place in more than 80% of households in Pakistan.
Populism, polarization, and extremism (individual, political, economic, religious, cultural, and societal) present as defining characteristics of Aurat March’s antecedents. The debate of women’s equal rights has been trying to set out to examine the discerningly quiet of society against injustice, not least because of the paucity of academia’s contributions and journals that would provide a futile ground for this movement. The hiatus of active and passionate engagement remained confined to murmurs and intermittent protests and runs largely in a subterranean manner restrained to limited circles of activists and victims and survivors, particularly those focusing on women’s rights and human rights. The brainchild of women and human rights in Pakistan confronted threats and opposition from both men and women largely because of the absence of a common collective vision of a better society with equality of men and women, lack of resources and strategies to construct such a society, and just objectives for both men and women.

**Ontology of Feminism in Pakistan’s Vernacular**

The process begins from the operational definitions in order to deconstruct the narrative in this framework. The linguistic roots of a woman (aurat) in Urdu are defined as “vulnerability, reproductive organs, and spouse to a man.”

This article will address the vernacular of *aurat* instead of “woman” in Pakistan’s context. Aurat March or women’s rights movement is a discourse centrally concerned with gender equality and empowerment. Aurat March is an expression of powerlessness (a supposedly weaker segment of Pakistani society) in an embedded patriarchal societal. It is a challenge and a proposition that strives toward injustice and suggestive of equal rights. Women! Aurat! “Problem” is not solved because of acknowledging demands objective resolutions while impassivity offers a subjective frame of mind. The status of *aurat* in Pakistan is one of the systemic gender subordination across class and regional (tribal/feudal/capitalist/societal) fabrics in women’s lives.

The language of gender equality and other theories of feminism have been tied to many things but “justice” and “equal rights” in Pakistani society’s cultural and historical framework. The new F-word “feminism” is viewed in Pakistan as a Western construct aimed at marginalizing non-Western societies. Western hegemony and feminist movements are the perceived root causes of all issues in Pakistani society—regarded Western agenda, if not an outright conspiracy. In the Pakistani framework, the absence of contested meanings and vernacular terms raises its own challenges. No term appropriately defines the concept of marital rape in local languages. The term used for rape of women is *zina-bil-fjabbr* (sex by force) which is hardly used for marital rape. This article offers an opportunity and a representation for policymakers, state forerunners, international audiences, and a steppingstone for restructuring power dynamics on equal grounds.

**Educative Narrative in Feminist Fiction**

Fiction birthed out of a society constructs a congruent synchronic or diachronic abstract of fiction, which portrays the realities, no matter how bitter, of society. In the portrayal of society, the feminist writer weaves the representation of women as the most significant and principal aspect of fiction writing as a part of feminism. Narrative feminist researchers view all forms of storytelling in cultural construct. How the narratives of stories around people intersect with the subjective interpretation of these events collude with the conformity of gaps, silence, and anomalies of stories can be minimized. Narrative feminist researchers analyze how language is the cornerstone of societal normalized, gender roles, and conventional approval of events. This conformity often excludes resistance, stereotypes, and rejection of others and different than themselves. Narratives with propagated plots, events, and characters clustered together operate on a power play of agreement with and use of dominant discourse or acceptance and approval of dominance that forbid hyper-individualization, denigrate, or pathology of the social problems.

The feminist movement becomes more substantial because of the feminist consciousness instigated by literary works such as Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* and Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House.* Works like Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1953) and writers Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Helene Cixous discovered new dimensions of feminist writing. In Pakistan, postcolonial fiction witnessed the portrayal of injustice, oppression, and exploitation by the colonizers and the postpartition nations. Fiction writers such as Bapsi Sidhwa, Mohsin Hamid, Zulfikar Ghose, Talat Abbasi, and Qaisra Shahraz are noteworthy because of the depictions of women in their writings. Sidhwa’s *The Bride* and *The Ice-Candy Man* (1988) refer to the impact of partition on the private and public lives of women. Another novel, *An American Brat,* by Sidhwa portrays the character of a woman who was able to harness her full potential and thrive when she experienced liberty out of social and religious restrictions to the extent that she questioned the repressive norms of Pakistani society. Another novel by Zulfikar Ghose, *Murder of Aziz Khan,* depicted a different perspective of feminism. Qaisra Shahraz’s *The Holy Woman* shows related trends of feminism and the lives of women in Pakistan. Zarri Bano was married to Holy Koran to become a holy woman who rises above her situation and finds a purpose in her work. *Cactus Town and Other Short Stories* by Amir
Hussein tells the story of oppressive social and political conditions in which Pakistani women survive. These very few portrayals discussed the images of women who emancipated out of passiveness and male-oppressive surroundings. The art of living for women lies in liberation from the restrictions imposed by traditional social systems which would pave the way for emancipation and empowerment of women in Pakistani society. As feminist English writers are trying to make a difference, the backlash of patriarchal hegemony continues to oppress women.

**Stereotypical Representations, Underrepresentations, Hyperrepresentations, or Misrepresentations of Gendered Roles in Media**

Presenting gender roles stereotypically is explicit discrimination. Stereotypical gender role representation/portrayal in mass media cultivates stereotypical ideologies and sexism in both men and women. It is significant to notice that media portrays women as committed to men and men committed to their work. Stereotypical identities of gender roles in Pakistani media support patriarchy, gender inequality, and the submissive role of women. Women are represented in the context of family doing housekeeping roles linked to maternity and domestication and as an inferior, passive, vulnerable part of society. Women are reduced to their body, appearance, silencing, inertness, ownership, violability, and lack of subjectivity. Attributing power and decision with men and passivity and submissiveness with women is prevalent in media portrayal. Social constructivism theory postulates that humans rationalize their practices by creating models of external realities and then materialize these models through language. Mass media mediates this perception, shapes behaviors, influences thinking, and motivates individuals to act in a similar manner. According to Blain, our stereotypical beliefs are socialized by the influence of family members and television, 2 important conduits of cultural influence. When these gender stereotypes conditioned in childhood continue in adolescence and adulthood, they become “dominant responses,” ie recalling learned stereotypic beliefs tend to be the first response in such situations. Media is considered influential in perpetuating dominant ideologies of patriarchy which could become the driving force in the exploitation of women. Media, particularly television dramas, encourage the audience to develop mindsets of how women should be seen and regarded.

These dramas seem to have categorized women into “good women” and “bad women” parameters. A “good woman” is characterized as quiet, tolerant, compromising, loyal, and understanding. She asks her husband’s permission to make any choice in her personal life. A “bad woman” is outspoken, assertive, modern, authoritative, open-minded, and opinionated. She is focused on her ambitions, education, career, and self-care. The assigned role depicts women as dumb, dependent, and housewives, which further invalidates their worth. Nonetheless, their bodies and body parts are objectified as more important than their personality as humans, which is why they are viewed as physical objects to satisfy the sexual desire of men. The calculated representation of violence against women on television is more significant as it is argued that patriarchal societies justify violence against women to maintain the discipline of families.

It is observed that the common storyline in Pakistani drama serials is based on 4 virtues of women: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. The dramas disempowered women who are assertive, decisive, confident, ambitious, independent, highly educated, and career-oriented (financially stable) by showing them as villainous/side characters or “bad women.” The lead character or the “good woman” usually belongs to the middle class, is less educated, and works only to support her family financially as a responsible daughter or mother. Furthermore, “good women” are expected to be weak, timid, soft-spoken, self-sacrificing, emotional, dependent, and submissive. The “good woman” is a “good wife,” she silently listens to the reprimands of her husband (verbal abuse), endures when he hits her (physical abuse), begs for forgiveness for provoking his anger (gaslighting psychological abuse), and in disagreement begs him not to deprive her of the honor of doing his daily chores (like dressing him and other personal tasks). She always addresses him as “app,” a formal speech reserved for authority, and he will refer to her as “tum,” an informal address in speech, further establishing/displaying an imbalance of power between husband and wife. The primary role of a woman in TV dramas is to arrange and manage the house and take care of her husband/in-laws. Hegemonic masculinity does not permit male characters to help women in housekeeping and childcare activities because they are feminine tasks, and in a patriarchal setting, they are beneath the dignity of a man. Men are believed to hold a degree of superiority over women and husbands over wives. Men are portrayed as controlling women and children in the family in the private and public domain.

A framework of intimate partner violence operates through 3 pathways: (a) at the individual level, men dominate through violent attitudes to control decision-making processes; (b) at the community level, violence against women is normalized and tolerated; and (c) at the state level, biased judgments in lawsuits acquit offenders. According to studies, Pakistani men believe symbolic humiliation of women necessary to discipline her if she neglects children or refuses sex. Pakistani husbunds display this commanding position by aggressively charging their wives in front of others because this indicates pride for husband and a good household manager in Pakistani culture.
Rape inflicted by one’s spouse seldom finds a place in a cultural concept of a rapist who is a stranger. Electronic media, especially movies, have demonstrated that victims enjoy coercive sex. This distorted vision of marital rape shapes the public perception that real rape is by a stranger, thereby culturally invalidating the concept of marital rape. Media highlighted victimhood through visual choices in the form of possessive attributes such as loose hair, bruises, torn clothes, and body language, which in a way excluded the rape by a spouse. Media discuss rape as strangers preying on women in dark alleys and not in the private sphere of a house or a bed by someone known to the victim.

**Narrative of Aurat March**

In a society where women (Aurat) are not considered the good half of the population—social, emotional, intelligent beings—the graphic of Aurat on the streets chanting, howling, marching, leading, and fighting for the rights of all Aurat is a daunting parallel to the imagination. The perceived threat of being cast as an “outsider” and perceived disrespect within their own family and community has an utter detrimental effect on Aurat March—women’s activism for their own and others’ rights. The placards signified power, resistance, and rage against the patriarchal system in Pakistan, which has been claiming the lives of women. Questions on women’s public visibility and involvement of certain slogans have been raised and the attempt to answer is that visibility means acknowledgment, organized actions mean autonomy, and reconfiguration means public space for women. Some of the Aurat March slogans are shown in Figure 1.

### “My Body, My Choice” (I Belong to Myself)

**Narrative**

This statement has been construed by conservatives as obscene with sexual connotation and direct denial of a woman’s expected “modesty.” What this meant was basic/fundamental human rights specifically for acid burn victims for refusal of proposal and unwanted and unwelcomed advances, honor killing in the name of “ghairat,” perceived indecency, refusal of arranged marriage, elopement in love marriage, watta-satta (exchange marriage), karokari (regional variations of honor killing are: karokaro in Sindh, siyahkari in Balochistan, kala-kali in Punjab, and tor-tora in the tribal areas of the northwest), marriage to Koran, dowry deaths, rape and refusal to imply with the any male member of a family, childhood and forced marriages and multiple pregnancies for male heir, harassment at work place, public spaces, and at home who refused to take “no” for an answer, and sexism (misogynistic and sexist jokes) on a day-to-day basis.

The need to ask for consent and reexamine the gendered roles does not seem to be a part of either open discourse or even private conversation in Pakistan. The most revolutionary impact the Aurat March has on society,
in general, is that people at least are acknowledging their presence as of gender in this society which would pave the way for a change in the individualistic and collectivist way of living. Most importantly, Aurat March has mobilized Pakistani society and abolished the claim that women are unaware of their own oppression and suppression. The notion and wildly held belief that Aurat is complicit in retaining the status quo that decrees them to the hidden segment of society completely disregarded the internalized misogyny.
When the anatomy of society is rigged against the women’s visibility in public to keep them in their inscribed confined roles of *tabula rasa*, Aurat March seems like an Achilles heel. Feminism with conditions is no feminism. Feminism delayed is feminism denied. This is intricate because it insinuates that feminism is prescriptively operative and dogmatically dictated under the bounds of “social approval” and hence birthed misconceptions and misunderstandings about what feminism is.\(^\text{50}\)

**Woman, Womanhood, and Matrimony in Pakistan**

**Marriage for Women**

Marriage is an economic proposition for a woman and her economic well-being depends on marriage in Pakistan’s socioeconomic structure. Refusal of matrimony is not a choice for a woman in a lower social class; financial dependence, perceived sexuality, and immorality are the factors that cannot manage her to escape the system. Marriage is a way of socialization and respectability in a society. There are no alternatives—stories of spinsters, alone old age at the mercy of male relatives, disrespectability among respectable society members, and tales of love, companionship, and religious obligation are the Machiavellian ways to compel a woman into matrimony. Further, it becomes an inevitable natural consequence of cultural teachings and exposure to marriage-fixated media. In one of the television dramas, the boy’s mother’s dialogue in episode 2 reflected rejection and grooming for the prospective bride:

“Ek to Zenia ki Umar Zyada Hai, American values hain usme, mamuli shakal surat ki hai, uska family background hume nahi pta. Biwi ko hamesha 6–7 saal miyan se chhota hona chahiye. Jitni jawan hogi utni asaani se tum usay mold kar sakoge, usay control kiya ja sakega” (Zenia is old aged with American values and is ordinary looking, and we know nothing about her family background. The wife should be at least 6 to 7 years younger than the man so that she can be molded and controlled by him).\(^\text{51}\)

**The Narration of Consent**

Men being dominant and women being objectified and sexually submissive agents in an unequal hierarchy of power in a patriarchal society—she is the *recipient* and he is the *presenter* of sex. Culture and society nurture this exercise of *power*, pornography fetishes, and law guards it. This subject of inquiry is the narrative of a woman’s consent which is embedded in the context of social, cultural, economic, and sexual and theological basis of consent in spousal or marital rape. Prevalence of marital rape and uncriminalizing it effectively endorses and reinforces the notion that human dignity and sexual anatomy in the case of a woman is nonexistent. The institution of marriage solely relies on the *nikkah* contract which executes obedience on the wife for
submission and confers on her spouse for her “correction.” The cause behind marital rape can be traced back to the social position of women in Pakistan’s society.

Historically, women in Pakistan are considered to be under the ownership of a man, be it a father or later husband. Hence, rape of a woman equates to a crime against property, so in various tribes, the penalty against rape involved paying compensation to the male member of a tribe or household. And as the wife is the property of the husband and the crime against own property implicates no red flag, the idea of marital rape is ruled out unequivocally. A woman’s inferiority is even more evident in Muslim Personal Law and the narrative of a society where a woman’s identity stems from her relation to a man: his daughter/sister, his wife/mother. Hence, her “owner” cannot violate her or commit a crime against her. Media has been glorifying marital rape and romanticizing it to the extent where it has become OK for men and women. In novels, dramas, movies, music videos, women ambiguously kept saying “no,” but man coaxes her and coerces her into sexual exchanges. Men and women internalize this learning and reenact the same with their spouse where men are more tenacious in their sexual demands. Consequently, women are raped within their marriage without understanding that it constitutes forced sex.

Before 2006, the Hudood Ordinance, 1979, defined rape as nonconsensual sexual intercourse with whom he or she is not validly married; hence, the language explicitly omitted marital rape from a legal context. For 27 years, the wife’s status has remained as a sexual property of the husband, and the law in Pakistan uncriminalized and secured marital rape as an offense. The state’s official norms recapitulate the patriarchal system on the level of design. In a 2003 domestic violence survey, 47% of women in Pakistan reported nonconsensual sex in their marriages.52 The absence of reported marital rape cases is unlikely because of their nonexistence but is deeply embedded into the roots of ambiguous law and normalized sociocultural injunctions, which imposed rigid societal gendered roles and unbent religious obligations of women’s duties.

**Marital Rape and Spousal Rights**

**Under Islamic Law**

Koran—the Holy Book of Muslims—in Surah AnNisa stated: “Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore, the righteous women are devoutly obedient, and guard in (the husband’s) absence what Allah would have them guard” (Quran, 4:34). Marriage in Islamic jurisdiction is a civil contract, and each spouse has rights and duties toward each other in a union to maintain peace and harmony. The same Surah AnNisa continues “(...) and the ones whom you fear their non-compliance, then admonish them and forsake them in their beds, and strike them, (ie, hit them lightly) yet in case they obey you, then do not seek inequitably any way against them” (Quran 3:34). It is unsurprising then that the concept of marital rape is alien to the majority of the mass. Forced intercourse and nonconsensual intercourse with a wife by itself is not regarded as an offense or a moral sin but may constitute for judicial dissolution of marriage. “Your wives are a tilth for you, so go to your tilth when or how you will...” (Quran, 2:223). The language of husband (subject) “plows” (action) “tilth” (object) shows the projected impassiveness of a wife in intercourse.

**Pakistani Laws and Women**

Since Pakistan’s independence from the British colonial era in 1947, 4 historical periods have happened: (a) Muslim rule before colonization, (b) colonial time and early independence, (c) the Hudood Ordinances from 1979, and (d) the Women’s Protection Bill from 2006. The lack of Mughal state archives contributes to the lack of materials on rape cases because in Muslim Laws it was difficult to get anyone convicted of rape. Pakistan inherited the Indian Penal Code that was based on English Law from 1860, which too did not criminalize marital rape unless the wife is below a certain age. New criminal laws, namely Hudood Ordinance, were introduced in 1979, which clearly excluded marital rape from the provision. Women’s Protection Bill was passed in 2006 based on arguments on women’s rights and feminism, reverting to colonial wording instead of developing new legislation.53 Moreover, the Qanoon-e-Shahadat Order of 1984 (Law of Evidence) reduced the legal status of women, which barred them from giving evidence in case of rape. The Zina Ordinance resulted in rape victims being imprisoned for zina unless proved by 4 pious Muslim witnesses. So are the Hudood Ordinances of 1979 and Qisas and Diyat Ordinance, which are apathetic toward women.

The existence of multiple judicial systems (high courts, sharia courts, and tribal courts) is another feature of the judiciary-legal system in Pakistan. In 1997, a woman went to Family Court to challenge the validity of her marriage because she had been abducted and forced to thumb-print on the marriage certificate. She was repeatedly raped by her abductor. Family Court charged the defendant with rape under Zina Ordinance, while the Federal Shariat Court acquitted the defendant on appeal stating, “the willful commission of zina cannot be alleged against a person who believes for good reasons that the woman with whom he is having sexual intercourse was his wife”.54

Before 2006, Section 6 of Hudood Ordinance, 1979 defined rape (zina bil-jabr) as sexual intercourse with a woman or man, as the case may be, to whom he or she is not validly married, in any of the following circumstances, namely:
(a) Against the will of the victim,
(b) Without the consent of the victim,
(c) With the consent of the victim, when the consent has been obtained by putting the victim in fear of death or of hurt, or
(d) With the consent of the victim, when the offender knows that the offender is not validly married to the victim and that the consent is given because the victim believes that the offender is another person to whom the victim is or believes herself or himself to be validly married.

This language explicitly excluded marital rape from the legal definition of rape till 2006, when the Protection of Women (Criminal Laws Amendment) Act was enacted and the definition of the offense was amended as follows:

A man is said to commit rape if he has sexual intercourse with a woman under circumstances falling under any of the following 5 descriptions:

(a) Against her will,
(b) Without her consent,
(c) With her consent, when the consent has been obtained by putting her in fear of death or of hurt,
(d) With her consent, when the man knows that he is not married to her and that the consent is given because she believes that the man is another person to whom she is or believes herself to be married; or
(e) With or without her consent when she is under 16 years of age.55

Laws of Pakistan Concerning Muslim Marriages include a minimum age of marriage, consent of wali, registration of marriage, polygamous marriages, and divorce by husband. The Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929, has made underage marriages a penal offense. Under the act, the minimum age of marriage for a male is 18 years, whereas the minimum age of marriage for a female is 16 years. Despite the fact that underage marriages are liable to punishment, such unions are not rendered invalid. If the husband has not obtained the consent of the existing wife or wives, the subsequent marriage remains valid.56 Recently, a 49-year-old religious scholar and a member of the National Assembly married an 18-year-old girl, who is his third wife and 31 years his junior. Instead of inciting outrage, the 49 years old was hailed and approved by the general public.

Sex outside marriage is criminalized and is classified into 2 separate offenses: Adultery (zina) and fornication. Adultery, in which at least one of the parties is or has been previously married, is a hadd (offense against God) in Pakistan and is liable to stoning to death, 10-year imprisonment, or 30 lashes depending on the evidence available. On the other hand, fornication is where both parties have never been married. After 2006, the offense is governed by s.496B of the Pakistan Penal Code and is punishable by 5 years in prison or a fine. Before 2006, accusing a man of rape could be used as a confession of zina/fornication by the victim in the event of insufficient evidence of rape.

In 2022, the Federal Shariat Court declared that judicial divorce/khula-seeking women should forego all her Haq Mehr (an obligatory payment made by the husband to his wife at the time of marriage in the form of money, jewelry, home goods, furniture, or any other form of property) and return 100% of Haq Mehr to their husbands.57 A clause providing for chemical castration of habitual rapists had been removed from the Criminal Law (Amendment) Bill, 2021, after the objections raised by the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII) describing the punishment of chemical castration of rapists as “unIslamic.”58 The CII halted legislation of domestic violence (prevention and protection) Bill 2021 considering the bill “contradict our social values” and declared it un-Islamic. The bill’s definition of “domestic violence” has been criticized as a potential threat to the family system.59

Section 3 of the bill defines “domestic violence” as follows: domestic violence shall mean all acts of physical, emotional, psychological, sexual, and economic abuse committed by a respondent against women, children, vulnerable persons, or any other person with whom the respondent is or has been in a domestic relationship that causes fear, physical, or psychological harm to the aggrieved person.

Section 3(b) defines “emotional, psychological and verbal abuse” as “where the aggrieved individual suffers from a pattern of degrading or humiliating conduct of the respondent.” Such abuse includes but is not limited to (a) repeated exhibition of obsessive jealousy causing repeated invasion of the victim’s privacy, liberty, integrity, and security; (b) insults or ridicule directed at the aggrieved person; (c) threats to cause physical pain to the spouse or other members of the shared household; (d) threats of divorce or second marriage on baseless accusations of insanity or infertility; (e) bringing false allegations upon the character of a female member or any member of the shared household; (f) willful or neglected abandonment of the aggrieved person; (g) stalking; (h) harassment; or (i) compelling the wife to cohabit with anybody other than the husband.

Section 4 would punish domestic violence with imprisonment for 6 months to 3 years “depending on the gravity of the act,” and a fine of ₹20,000 to ₹100,000 (about US $123 to $616) to be paid as compensation to the aggrieved person. In default of payment of the fine, the court could award simple imprisonment for 3 months.

The argument that the bill is un-Islamic for disallowing men to physically discipline or reprimand their wives and children is steeped in the ideological superiority of one sex over another. In 2016, the CII had proposed a bill that allowed a husband to “lightly” beat his wife “if needed” and prohibited mixing of the genders in schools, hospitals, and offices. It seems another reason for the magnitude of the
backlash against Aurat Match is because of the slogan Mera jism, meri marzi (My body, my choice/I belong to myself) because it demands control over the sexual and reproductive rights of women. The idea of control gets threatened when women assert, “I belong to myself,” independent of their relationship with a man. On the topic of domestic violence, it is evident that male anxiety for maintaining dominance in the house and on women’s bodies is dictating the interpretation under the guise of religion.59

Sex, Rape, and Consent

Sex

In Pakistan, sexual intercourse can legally only take place within a heterosexual marriage. Sex outside marriage is criminalized and is classified into 2 separate offenses: adultery (zina) and fornication.60

Rape

The International Classification of Crime for Statistical Purposes (ICCS) defines rape as:

[S]exual penetration without valid consent or with consent as a result of intimidation, force, fraud, coercion, threat, deception, use of drugs or alcohol, abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability, or the giving or receiving of benefits. The penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim.61

Force

Force does not always refer to physical pressure. Perpetrators may use emotional coercion, psychological force, or manipulation to coerce a victim into nonconsensual sex. Some perpetrators will use threats to force a victim to comply, such as threatening to hurt the victim or their family or other intimidation tactics.62

Consent is a voluntary agreement to the other person’s proposition. Sexual consent is an agreement to participate in a sexual activity. Consent is freely given, reversible, informed, enthusiastic, and specific (FRIES).63

In Pakistan, the question of marital rape is not about the presence or absence of “consent” but the very nature of “consent.” The stakes are raised higher in conditions regarding marital rape especially when the majority of the women are pressured and forced into arranged marriages. The new questions that raised the demand of serious reflection that if a woman does not have the right to consent to marriage, how could she consent to have sex within marriage. The point to be noted here is that Pakistani Law requires a woman’s consent for a marriage contract to be valid but how that consent is forced during the marriage ceremonial act is another question over the nature of the definition of consent. According to the UK government’s Forced Marriage Unit Statistics 2018, 44% of cases of forced marriages in the UK originated from Pakistan and over 83% of cases were handled entirely in the UK.64

Obligation and Obliged to “Consent”

Two studies from Iran and Pakistan—states governed by the Islamic Law—found that the majority of the women considered sexual submission toward the husband as religiously obligatory. Moreover, the studies reported women having emotions of guilt and remorse for being unable to fulfill their duties and deemed themselves not good Muslims. The majority of the men and women in Pakistan believed sex as men’s right in marriage and women should submit to men’s sexual demands.65,66 Is it truly a consensual and voluntary agreement when a wife believes in a religious obligation toward the needs of a man and “consent” to sex? A disregarded surrender of sexual autonomy and bodily integrity to the point where it is no longer perceived morally wrong has become normal to oblige the societal standard of women’s piety.

Consequently, she inherently internalizes this “natural” order of things and her obligation as a wife. She believes that the husband has more right on her body than she does. The concept of consent (voluntary agreement) of the wife to the man’s sexual advances contextualized the power dynamic over the wife’s sense of self and identity. She has consented because she is a good Muslim wife, and that form of consent eventually strengthened the notion that it “violates women because sex is what woman is for.”67,68 Extraneous factors and repercussions for a wife who does not wish to consent—condoned by the Law—are there to make consent ever more hesitant and discourage refusal: polygamy,69 threat of the husband’s second, third, or fourth marriage compelled an unwilling wife to consent for sexual advances, and yet that unwillingly forced consent would constitute as consent within the framework of law which criminalizes rape.69 Gendered stereotypes, power-imbalance, and cultural subliminal messages of hegemonic masculinity, internalized misogyny, and rape myths regulate rape culture and rape justification, consequently cultivating how victims and offenders are viewed. It is important to understand the contextual implications including power dynamics of rape, prerape dynamics, stereotypical signs, and psychological processes of rapists. One of the reasons marital rape goes unnoticed or unreported is because of marginalization (labeling, shaming, or blaming). Instead of being offered support, they are judged, exploited, and even killed in the name of honor. Further in marital contract, “no” is considered an insult and a trigger or a justification for violating a woman. Internalized gender roles and expectations put structural obstacles for women who want economic independence. A woman’s economic contingence is subjected to her fulfillment of man’s needs including sex—this arrangement is disconcertingly analogous to legally ordained sex slavery. The wife’s covenant of “consent” to sexual advances alternatively did not deprive her of food and shelter.
Acknowledging Marital Rape

Pakistani laws need to acknowledge the inequalities in marital laws including woman’s explicit consent in marriage, criminalized polygamy, court-ordained divorce, and woman postdivorce alimony. Any subsequent legislative or legal execution on marital rape must consider the subtleties and nuances of “consent” coerced within circumstantial structural inequalities through economic, social, sexual, judicial, and religious compulsion, violation, and exploitation. Therefore, marital rape deemed rape in marriage a physical invasion of sexual nature by intimidation, force, compulsion, or the abuse of power or position.

One prevalent argument often used to support the nonexistence of marital rape is that entering into marriage means that a nonnegotiable consent is given. Another argument often used to support the noncriminalization of marital rape is that women could misuse this law by accusing their husbands of rape. Proponents of these arguments failed to acknowledge the stigma, inaccessibility of resources, legal process to file a case, hostility toward the wife, and pressure to compromise/not lodge the complaint/withdraw the case, and more antiwomen narrative is sufficiently equipped so the possibility for a woman to manipulate the Pakistani legal system seems highly questionable.73

A country that becomes independent in the pretext of Islamic principles frequently avoids and twists Islam, especially regarding the status of women. In Pakistan, few often claimed that the criminalization of marital rape is against the teachings of Islam. Yet many Muslim countries with large Muslim populations and rich Islamicate history, unlike Pakistan who only came into being in 1947, do not consider the criminalization of marital rape as nonIslamic or a threat to the institution of marriage. Muslim-majority countries including Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mauritania, Qatar, Somalia, Sudan, Tunisia, Turkmenistan, and Turkey consider the violation of the wife by her husband as a criminal offense and have laws against marital rape.

It must be realized that the violation of a woman’s personal space, her dignity, her sovereignty, and in essence, her humanity is harmed by rape because rape is about control and power. A woman is not the other sex but the other half of the population. The wife has a choice—be it economic, social, physical, sexual, or private sphere of her life. Both legal and social structures in Pakistan demand unprotection and unendorsement for the husband’s dominion over the wife. Even the ultimatum to change her sir-name should be reckoned unsolicited. Consequently, in a society where women are deprived of their basic rights such as pressured change of sir-name after marriage, decisions on what she should wear, and whether or not she should go out, the same women are demanding equal rights and the autonomy to say “NO.”

Women have minds and souls as well as just hearts, and they’ve got ambition and talent as well as just beauty. And I’m sick of people saying love is all a woman is fit for.74
Conclusion

During and post COVID-19, women will need safety and solidarity behind and beyond the walls as well. Feminism is the opposition of patriarchal system’s way of reinforcing binary and black-and-white constructs—perceived good feminism/bad feminism where good constitutes the demand of health care and education rights and bad constitutes marital, sexual, and bodily autonomy, political/legal rights, economic equality, reproductive rights, and minority’s rights. Feminism
delayed is feminism denied. Feminism is about choice, freedom, liberty, empowerment, justice, and equality.

If not you, then who? If not now, then when?

Acknowledgment
The authors would like to extend their gratitude toward the online platforms from where these protest signs have been selected and they are included in the reference list.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD
Sonia Mukhtar https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4480-648X

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