

# Aurat March & a Woman's Body

Text and artwork by  
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The Aurat March posters were drawn, starting in 2019, as a way to call attention to the march and invite women to join. On the three posters, there is a woman quietly looking upwards as a fire burns behind her; a woman shouting slogans; three women speaking in unison. Their costumes are also meant to cover a spectrum—a head-covering scarf; a dupatta around the shoulders; free flowing hair.



*Aurat March posters for the  
Lahore march, 2019*

Since these first posters were pasted around cities, much has been said about what these women represent, and they often have been torn off walls. The way to counter the vandalism has been to make each year's poster artwork freely available online to download and print. Pasting them around cities has become a collective act, and the art is often printed alongside the manifesto of the march.

In 2020, the theme for Aurat March Lahore focused on the economic empowerment of women. The poster features a school girl getting an education (also as a homage to Malala), a home-based worker embroidering, a woman working in the fields, and women walking and cycling in their city. A common male response to the poster was to criticize the women's clothing—especially the fact that the central student did not have a dupatta on.



*Aurat March Lahore poster on women's economic empowerment, 2020  
Community outreach using the poster, photo courtesy Aurat March Lahore.*

This flattening of women's experiences to the clothes they wear—the focus on clothes of Muslim women in particular—seems to be a worldwide issue. Women's bodies are sites of political debate, and how women dress seems to be a collective, societal concern. In the innumerable cases of sexual violence and harassment that come to light, the patriarchal norm is to ask— but what was she wearing at the time?



The male backlash to the posters was the starting point to my questioning why certain depictions of women on hoardings and posters stay up around the city— docile women in cooking oil ads, seductive lawn photo-shoots, actresses in stage dramas— but a representation of a woman as a political being— a non-commercial, non-salable commodity that does not cater to the male gaze— provokes such a violent reaction.



*Artworks made in response to the backlash to "My Body My Choice" as a way to create empathy for why women's bodily autonomy matters*

One placard held by a young woman at the 2020 march that said, "Mera Jism Meri Marzi" ("My Body My Choice") caused an uproar in the country and opened up a national debate on women's bodies. So sexualized is a woman's body that any mention of the word "jism" is considered vulgar; and any attempts to talk about body autonomy, reproductive rights or consent is countered by accusations of being un-Islamic. It opened up Aurat March organizers and attendees to right-wing attacks, death and rape threats, and both online and offline harassment. To think that a simple poster could make the patriarchal structure tremble!



As the pandemic raged around us, disproportionately affecting women's safety and health, the theme for 2021's Aurat March became women's health crisis. The theme also gave me the opportunity to use art to subvert the notions around how we see a woman's body in public. The poster artwork shows a cross-section of a woman's body—imagining a reality where a society supported women's health causing her anatomy to bloom with good health. The representation of a woman as a body—composed of skin, bone and muscle—was my way of separating the woman from a sexual object for male objectification. She has a 'jism'—same as any man. And thus she can exist and be visible in public spaces as well.

*Aurat March Lahore's 2021 poster on women's health crisis pasted on a wall*







The next year found us in the midst of countless harrowing tales of violence against women. The Aurat March theme centered around justice- asking what does it mean to create a just society and how do we center survivors in our ideas about gender-based violence? The poster used headlines of violence committed against women and trans people taken from the archives of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. Two women embracing are juxtaposed over these headlines- meant to show how support for survivors should come first; and how women are the ones who will fight for their sisters.





Aurat March posters on the streets of Lahore, 2019







*Top Left: Aurat March poster centering Baloch women by Isma Gul Hasan, 2021*

*Top Right: Qandeel Baloch masks at Aurat March Karachi 2018; photo courtesy Akhtar Soomro/Reuters*

*Bottom: Aurat March mural defaced; photo courtesy Aurat March Islamabad, 2020*



Every year the Aurat March artworks pasted and painted across cities are made by women and channel their hopes, their defiance, their resistance to patriarchal society that holds them down.

From Rahema Zaheer's illustration of Qandeel Baloch whose face is used as a mask at the marches; to Isma Gul Hasan's Aurat March poster centering Baloch women and their struggle; to the mural painted by Nida Mushtaq and Aurat March Islamabad that was defaced by ring-wing protesters; to the digital illustrations created by countless women in support of feminist causes and victims of violence— young women are using art to make their voices heard. Aurat March has been historic in how it has ignited the fire in so many of us around the country to change things— and these young artists will not back down.

