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Beyond the Protest: Affective, Spatial, and Creative Practices of Feminist Resistance in Aurat March Lahore

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*To Zineb,
“Aaye feminism di bahaar”*

Abstract:

The research employs feminist theory as both an analytical and a methodological lens to explore the spatial, creative and affective practices of *Aurat March* women volunteers in Lahore. Drawing on interviews, audio-visual research and active participation, it foregrounds volunteers' experiences and meaning-making processes as they navigate patriarchy, analysing the entanglements of collective feminist work and everyday resistance. The first chapter explores how volunteers contest gendered power relations through everyday spatial practices and artistic interventions. The analysis considers place-making strategies of navigating violence, moral regulation and reclaiming the city through leisure and collective loitering. Chapter two examines how volunteers articulate resistance to patriarchy by re-signifying cultural symbols and vernacular songs, mobilizing emotions and affective registers while interrogating class, gender, and ethnic positionalities. Chapter three examines how volunteers situate their politics within the historical trajectory of Pakistani women's movements, unsettling a wave-centric narrative and arguing that feminist legacies are relationally produced through embodied performances and affective encounters. Overall, the research expands the scholarship on resistance and feminism by moving beyond dominant white feminist-centric frameworks, by proposing more interdisciplinary approaches and locally-grounded understandings of feminist expressions in the region.

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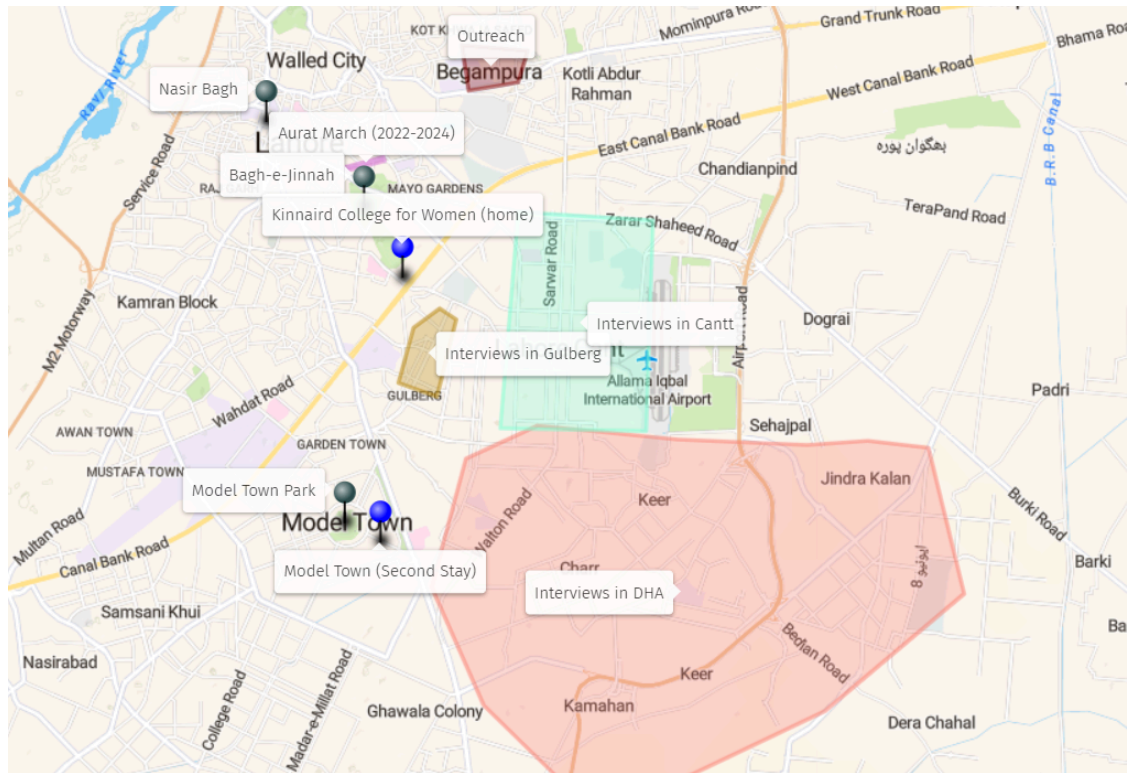


Fig. 1 Main fieldwork areas in Lahore (2022-2024), including participant observation and interviews

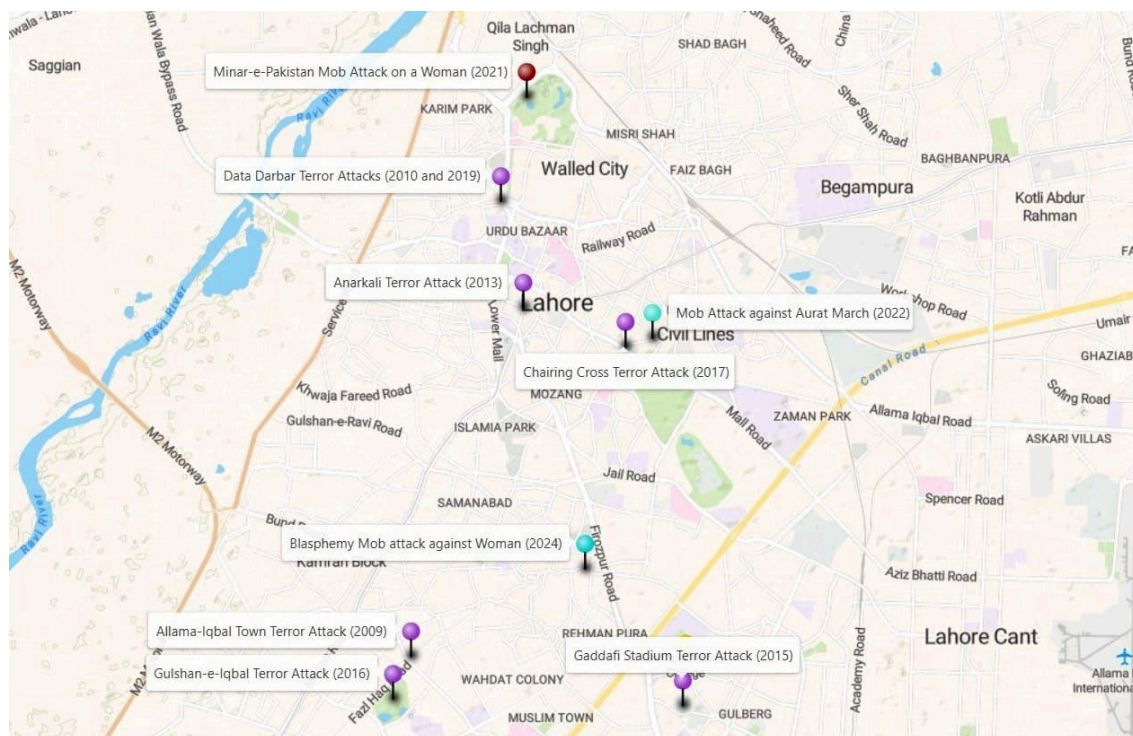


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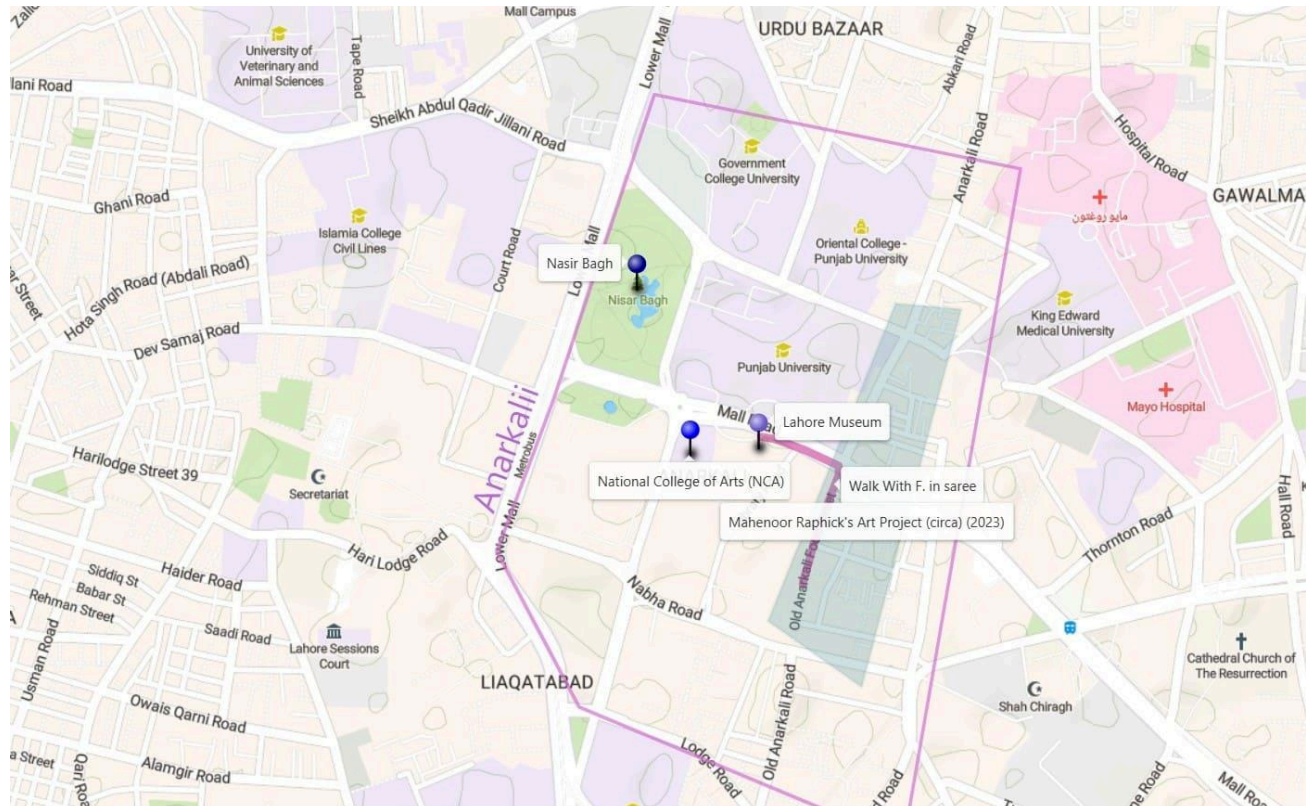


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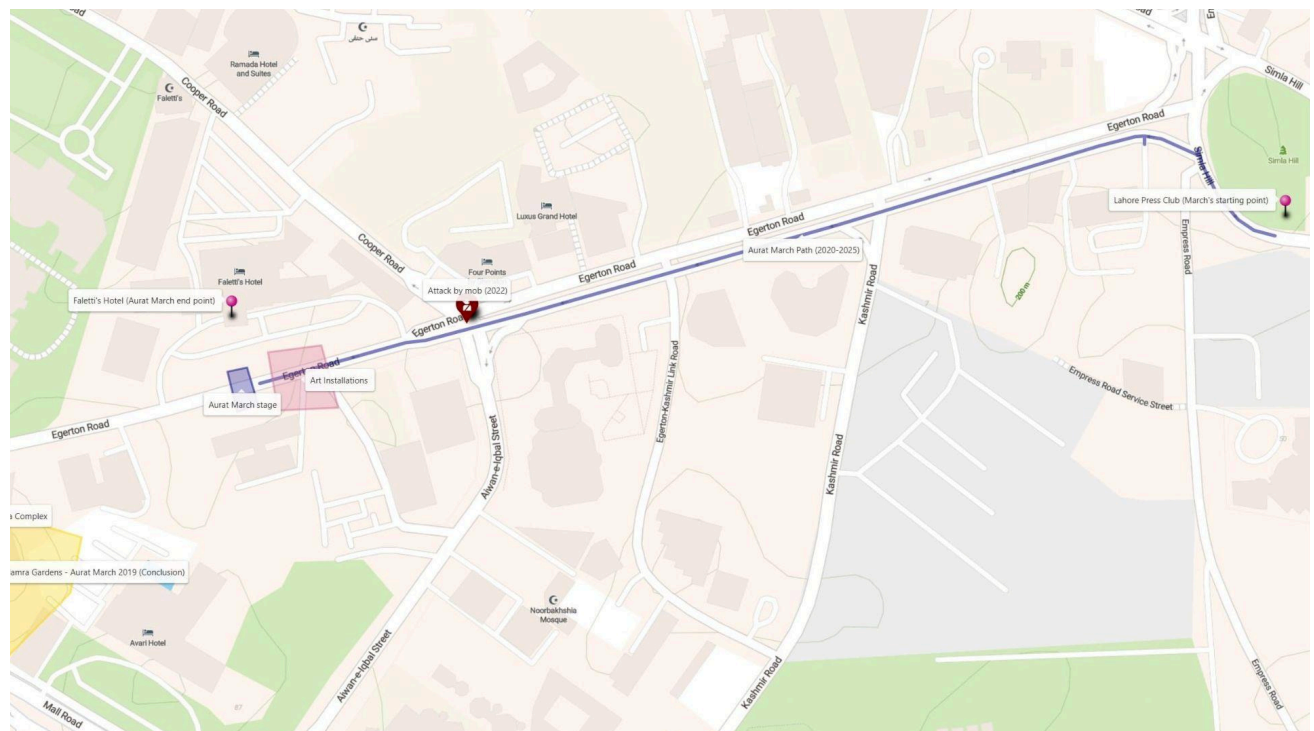


Fig. 4 Aurat March Route (2022-2024)

Abbreviations

AAM	Aurat Āzādī March
AM	Aurat March
APWA	All Pakistan Women's Association
Cantt	Lahore Cantonment
DHA	Defence House Authority
DRF	Digital Rights Foundation
G@D	Girls at Dhābās
JI	Jamā'at-e-Islāmī
KCW	Kinnaird College for Women
LUMS	Lahore University of Management Sciences
NCA	National College of Arts
PECA	Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (2016)
PEMRA	Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority
PSC	Progressive Students Collective
PTA	Pakistan Telecommunication Authority
PTI	Tēhrīk-e-Insāf Party
TLP	Tēhrīk-e-Labbāik Pākistān
TPA	Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2018
TTP	Tēhrīk-e-Tālībān Pākistān
WAF	Women's Action Forum

Glossary

acchī	good
aurat	woman
āwāra	aimless /loose / idle
behan-chārah (behenchara)	sisterhood
be-ghairat	shameless, without honour
be-ḥayā	shameless, immodest
burī	bad (f.)
chādar aur chār-dīwārī	lit. “veil and four walls”, expression commonly used in Pakistani discourse to refer to the ideal of women’s modesty and seclusion within the domestic sphere.
ḍhābā	small restaurant or chai place (tea stall?)
ḍhōlkī (dholki)	traditional pre-wedding folk ritual gathering attended by women, often accompanied by singing and celebrations.
dōstī	friendship
fahāshī	obscenity, vulgarity, indecency
gīt	(folk) song
gajrā / gajre (gajra/gajray)	flower garland / flower bracelet, usually exchanged during cultural celebrations
‘Id (‘Id al-fitr)	religious festival marking the 1st of Shawwal and the end of the holy month of <i>Ramzān</i>
‘izzat	honour
khwāja-sīrā	recognized third-gender community in South Asia, often equated with transgender people, who historically held distinct social and ceremonial roles in the political and cultural life in the region.

mehndī	art of applying henna paste on different parts of the bodies on the occasion of cultural events and religious celebrations.
mūrat	(lit.) statue, idol; in Pakistan the term is used by some people, especially transgender and khwāja-sīrā communities, to refer and claim non conventional, non-binary male/female gender identities.
pādārshāhī (pidarshāhī)	patriarchy
sāthī	companion, comrade
ṭappā/ ṭappe (tappa/tappay)	a short folk verse or song, often sung in a playful or expressive manner during traditional gatherings in Punjab and other areas of the region.
yārī	friendship, companionship

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1. Introduction:

*“Kuriye mere des diye, taqdeer bana le tu
Tere te koi zulm kare, talwar utha le tu.”¹*

1.1. Locating *Aurat March*

1.1.1 *Aims and Objectives of the research*

Since its emergence in 2019², the *Aurat March* (Urdu: “Woman’s March”) has become one of the most visible and contentious sites of feminist mobilization in Pakistan, denouncing patriarchy as a system of gender oppression intersected to political, economic and religious structures and demanding for a radical societal change.

Each year, on International Women’s Day³, a vibrant crowd of predominantly urban upper-middle-class women and gender minorities take to the streets across multiple cities of Pakistan, articulating their joy, anger and grief, celebrating their struggle while voicing their demands and claiming public spaces. Grounded in the feminist belief that “the personal is political”, the *March* exposes the intimate and pervasive nature of patriarchal violence embedded across institutions, practices and spatialities, confronting issues ranging from bodily autonomy and gendered division of labor to broader State sanctioned forms of marginalization and violence affecting women and communities from diverse ethnic, religious and regional backgrounds.

Over the years, the movement has reshaped national debates on gender and women’s rights, bringing into public spaces a striking and unprecedented visual landscape of

¹ “O girl of my land, shape your own destiny
If anyone oppresses you, raise your sword.”

(From the song “Kudiye Merē Dēs Diyē”, sung at *Aurat March* Lahore)

² Although women first gathered in 2018 in the wake of the global #MeToo movement, the first march formally organized under the banner of “Aurat March” took place in 2019, marking the transition from a more spontaneous demonstration to a coordinated and structured mobilization.

³ In 2025, the event was celebrated on 12th February, aligning with the National Women’s Day, while in 2026, as I write this thesis, it did not take place.

marching and dancing bodies, angry chants, irreverent placards and performances articulating grief and demanding gender justice and political accountability. At the same time, the *March's* provocative language and visibility were met with intense public backlash. Campaigns of defamation, including the circulation of doctored images and accusations of blasphemy, have sought to discredit the movement, reflecting broader anxieties about women openly and irreverently challenging patriarchal authority and demanding accountability “and joke and laugh while doing so” (Hussain 2019). For these reasons, the *Aurat March* has come to occupy a central place in contemporary debates on feminism, citizenship and womanhood in Pakistan, emerging as a key arena for shifts in cultural consciousness where competing visions of gender and morality are publicly contested.

Amidst and beyond this contested landscape, how does *Aurat March* unfold? Whose personal struggles does it envision and weave it into an insurgent performance? And which community, dreams, hopes and aspirations sustain and nurture it?

This thesis explores the practices of *Aurat March* volunteers in Lahore, examining how they navigate, resist and contest patriarchal structures and articulate feminist politics through their participation in the movement as well as within their personal trajectories. Expanding the main framing of *Aurat March* beyond a public performance, this work situates it primarily for it being a community of volunteers embedded in historical trajectories of women's uprisings and contemporary feminist discourses, shaped by political and socio-economic contingencies. This perspective allows the study to move beyond the *March's* public visibility and explore the less visible transformative interpersonal processes through which volunteers get together, share personal struggles, collectively organize and envision feminist futures. By centering volunteers' subjectivities and lived experiences, the study investigates how feminist politics and resistance are articulated in relational spaces, where *Aurat March* emerges through the narratives, experiences and representations of the community of women who organize, sustain and bring the *Aurat March* into life each year. In order to do so, the thesis foregrounds the creative, spatial and cultural dimensions of feminist politics as a

privileged site to explore how volunteers articulate feminist praxis and knowledge while challenging patriarchal hegemonic structures. Within this study, embodied performances, collective artistic practices and visual artworks are not mere aesthetic embellishments; they constitute forms of knowledge production and political expression, articulating place-making processes on their relations with the city, and conveying affective meanings that intersect with more conventional modes of political action. Applied across the three main chapters, this work explores the *Aurat March* by foregrounding the imaginative, relational and performative dimensions through which feminist politics is imagined and enacted. In doing so, the study seeks to draw attention to the entanglements between collective participation in the *Aurat March* and personal everyday struggles, emphasising the community as a political space where volunteers cultivate desires and aspirations, share traumas, heal and articulate politics rooted in collective care and mutual support.

In the light of this, this thesis asks the following questions: how do women navigate and contest patriarchal control over their lives as it emerges through their personal struggles and within a community of volunteers? How do the artistic, spatial and affective dimensions of their political work function as sites through which feminist resistance is imagined and articulated? While these questions serve as a central analytic compass, each chapter addresses a set of more focused questions that explore particular dimensions of the community, intersecting spatial practices, collective performances and processes of legacy-making.

This introduction situates the study within its historical and contemporary context, engaging with existing theoretical contributions and outlining the methods and ethical commitments framing the research. Before reviewing the literature on the *Aurat March*, the following two sections outline a brief historical overview of the Pakistani women's movement, situating it within wider transregional transformations, and examining its connections to the emergence and articulation of Women's Studies in the country.

1.1.2 Historical Trajectories of Women's Mobilizations in Pakistan

As Cheema compellingly argues in her *The Other #MeToos* (2023), the 2018's #MeToo campaign was not a uniform global phenomenon but was translated and rearticulated across diverse communities and socio-political contexts, giving rise to heterogeneous feminist struggles across the Global South. In Pakistan, the campaign, which served as an important point of convergence for many of the women who would later form the *Aurat March*, opened new online and offline spaces for public conversations on gendered violence, harassment, and sexuality, while simultaneously reshaping existing understandings and practices of feminist activism. Yet the *Aurat March* did not emerge from a historical vacuum. While its formation was catalyzed by transnational feminist mobilizations and the expanding possibilities afforded by digital technologies and social media, it emerged within a landscape already shaped by decades of women's struggles, in the form of collective mobilizations and campaigns across the country, legal and institutional battles, and a vibrant production of feminist scholarship. Situating the *Aurat March* within this broader historical trajectory is therefore essential for understanding not only its emergence and political significance, but also the ways in which its organizers politically positioned themselves in relation to the evolving socio-cultural and religious milieu of contemporary Pakistan.

Since Pakistan's establishment in 1947, women's organizations advocated for social reforms through a range of civic and social initiatives⁴. Yet it was only under General Zia-Ul-Ha'q military rule in the late 1970s and 1980s that a sustained and visible women's movement took shape through collective street mobilization. Following his military coup in 1977, Zia inaugurated a decade-long process of Islamization, or "sunnification" (Toor 2011), which brought a heavy influence of sunni islamic interpretation and sectarianism in Pakistan, profoundly reshaping the country's social, political, and cultural order. Through a series of legal measures, including the Hudood

⁴ One of the first and most noteworthy examples has been the APWA (All Pakistan Women's Association) a voluntary, non-political women's organization funded by Begum Ra'ana Liaquat Ali in 1949 and set out to address the educational, social and cultural welfare of Pakistani women. Later, under the military government of Ayub Khan (1958-1969), the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance (1961) introduced important reforms to the Muslim law, expanding legal protections for women and orphans, in matters of marriage, divorce, polygamy and inheritance.

Ordinances (1979), the regime reconfigured the Penal Code in ways that profoundly affected the legal status and everyday lives of women and religious minorities.⁵ It was in response to these regressive and patriarchal policies that the **Women's Action Forum** (WAF), or *Khawātīn Mahāz-e-ʿAmal*, was established in Karachi in 1981 by women associated with Shirkat Gah, a small voluntary women's collective established a few years earlier, before expanding to Lahore, Islamabad and Peshawar. As a platform bringing together individuals and organizations largely composed by urban upper-class women holding a secular, liberal feminist and progressive political view, WAF openly opposed Zia's authoritarianism and its discriminatory legislation through the first women-led public demonstrations, which encountered state violence and repressions⁶. Alongside protests, legal activism emerged as a key form of resistance: lawyers such as Asma Jehangir and Hina Jilani defied the Hudood Ordinances through courts, making legal advocacy a crucial strategy for defending women's rights when the state itself failed to guarantee justice.⁷ Widely regarded as a pivotal moment in the history of feminism in Pakistan, the emergence of WAF marked a fundamental shift in elite women's understanding of their relationships with the state, from a modernizing agent of women's rights reforms to a political actor that required contestation and uneasy negotiations (Mumtaz and Shaheed 1987, Jamal 2005).

Many WAF women were already active as lawyers, academics, artists, social workers, and intellectuals, and later became some of Pakistan's most influential human rights advocates and policymakers. During Zia era, they established key social, legal and research organizations, including AGHS Legal Aid Cell (1980), the Applied

⁵ Among the new offenses introduced (theft, fals accusation, prohibitions against intoxications), the Hudood Ordinances criminalized sexual intercourse outside marriage, without making any legal distinction between adultery (*zina*) and rape (*zina bil jabr*). They also introduced severe punishments based on the Quran and Sunnah, including whipping and stoning to death. These Ordinances made women particularly exposed to accusations and arrest, as victims of rape often faced significant obstacles in proving the crime and risked prosecution for *zina* themselves.

⁶ It was particularly against the proposed Law of Evidence (1984), which reduced women's legal status making it difficult for women to seek justice, that WAF Lahore mobilized and organized a public demonstration despite the ban on political gatherings under martial law. The protest, violently attacked by police who arrested the participants, became one of the first and most iconic acts of resistance to Zia-ul-Haq's policies.

⁷ This legal work would later lead to the establishment of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) in 1987, which has become a leading platform for monitoring human rights violations and justice in Pakistan till today.

Socio-Economic Research Centre, or ASR (1982), Simorgh - Women's Resource and Publication Centre (1985) in Lahore, and the Aurat Foundation (1986) in Islamabad, alongside the already established Shirkat Gah (1975)⁸. These played a central role in advancing gender justice through advocacy campaigns, publication of researches and reports, offering legal aid, and doing policy engagement by demanding reforms and an end to discriminatory laws.

At the same time, another important (though less acknowledged) actor in the women's mobilizations against Zia's regime was the *Sindhīyānī Tehrīk* (Women's Movement of Sindh). Established in 1982 in the southern Province of Sindh and emerging from the 'Awāmī Tēhrīk, it developed alongside WAF, but differed for its agrarian composition and socialist view, and enabled a huge mobilization of women who faced economic and gendered marginalization (Ahmad 2025)⁹. Nevertheless, it was WAF activists who, drawing on their social, cultural and economic capital, were able to establish networks and organizations that would become influential political actors in the following decades, engaging and negotiating with successive governments on women's rights and legal reforms. As pointed out by Khan, although the movement was limited in numerical terms, it represented a landmark moment in the country's history, as "a sustained collective action by women for their rights" which "determined the legislative and policy agenda for their progress, and shaped the discourse around gender and social justice issues in the country" (2018, 2).

Since the Zia era, the relationship between women's activists and the state has been signed by ambivalent and contrasting dynamics of "advances and setbacks" in legal reforms and state policies (Weiss 2014, 21) oscillating between "accommodation and confrontation" (Saigol 2013, 30), across periods of democratic rules, military regimes, and the growing influence of religious right-wing parties. The late 1980s and 1990s also

⁸ Among WAF's most prominent activists (many of whom based in Lahore) are Khawar Mumtaz, professor and former chairperson of the NCSW; Farida Shaheed, human right activist and currently UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education; Nighat Said Khan, researcher and co-founder of research center ASR; (late) Rubina Saigol, educator, feminist scholar and researcher; (late) Lala Rukh, pioneering artist, educator, and cultural activist; and writer Neelam Hussain, writer, translator and publisher at Simorgh.

⁹ Founded in Hyderabad in 1970 by progressive leftist writers and political activists, 'Awāmī Tahṛīk emerged as a secular left-wing party fighting for social justice, anti-imperialism, anti-feudal politics and the rights of Sindh and its people.

saw a growth in women-led NGOs, advocacy organizations and foundations, facilitated by the growing influx of international donor funding, economic liberalization and Pakistan's increasing integration to transnational developments and right-based agendas. Through participation in UN-sponsored conferences and international forums, these women organizations became important interlocutors with the state, promoting accountability to international conventions and gender equality commitments.¹⁰

When considering their impact, these transnational forces have reshaped women's movements across the Global South in important ways. On the one hand, they facilitated the circulation of new discourses on women's rights, strengthened women's organizations, and expanded opportunities for collaboration and negotiation between the state and women's movements (Basu 2010). Shahnaz Khan notes (2006) that they also fostered solidarity among women by linking shared experiences of patriarchy to broader transnational power relations and geopolitical trends, such as the increasing militarization. On the other hand, these processes contributed to the **co-optation and depoliticization** of feminism's transformative and oppositional character. As several former WAF activists themselves acknowledged, the women's movement in Pakistan became increasingly professionalized and NGO-led, with many feminists becoming incorporated in the establishment, focusing on donor-driven projects which progressively institutionalized activism through gender training and mainstreaming initiatives (Saigol 2005; 2013). Saigol (2005) also highlights a problematic aspect of the dependence on international donors, which is their frequent endorsement or cooperation with undemocratic and militarized regimes while parallelly supporting initiatives of gender equality. As a result, feminist activism, operating within the boundaries set by global governance agendas, significantly constrained its ability to articulate more radical critiques of wider systems of political injustice, inequality and authoritarianism.

¹⁰ Among the most significant developments were Pakistan's participation in the World Conferences of Women, in particular the Beijing Conference of 1995, which prompted the government to adopt the National Plan of Action (NPA) aimed at promoting gender equality and strengthening protections for women's rights. Pakistan also ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1996, committing the state to international standards, and established the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW) in 2000, to review and monitor progresses on women's rights in line with international conventions.

Throughout the 1990s in Pakistan, “gender” became progressively tied to development assistance, often functioning as a technical rather than political category. In this context, Khan characterized feminist activism as entering a period of “stagnation” and “apathy” (1995, 193), marked by a growing disconnection from grassroots concerns and a limited capacity to challenge underlying structures of power. Importantly, as Saadia Toor stresses out (2011), the NGOization of women's activism took place alongside the broader decline of the organized left: political parties, trade unions, student organizations, already weakened under Bhutto and Zia, were further undermined by privatization and the collapse of the Soviet Union (1991).

Significantly, the NGOization of women's activism contributed to a growing perception of feminism as an upper-class project, more concerned with preserving its social position and privileges than addressing the structural inequalities affecting the poor, rural, and less educated women. Jalal argued that this reflected a degree of “subservience” to the state (1991), rooted in the class location of many activists, which shaped the limits of their political demands. These criticisms intensified during the Musharraf martial law era (1999-2008), when the accommodation of some women's organizations to a military rule that presented itself as moderate and reformist was seen as an attempt to prioritize limited liberal reforms over broader democratic struggles. Following the 9/11 and the consequent War of Terror (WoT), such perceptions became even more pronounced, with women's rights organizations increasingly portrayed as a mirror of foreign imperialist agendas. In fact, this period also witnessed an increasing number of women who did not identify with the secular-liberal feminist framework entered Pakistan’s civil and political sphere. As Afiya Shehribano Zia notes (2020), the rise of **post-secular Islamic women's organizations**, mainly associated with the far right-wing religious party *Jamā‘at-e-Islāmī*¹¹, challenged the dominance of secular feminist discourses by foregrounding faith-based identities and rejecting liberal universalism as “colonial legacies or western imports” (7) imposed on women within Muslim contexts. These organizations successfully mobilized women across different classes, particularly

¹¹Jamā‘at-e-Islāmī, founded in 1941 in Lahore, consistently opposed several state-led reforms concerning women across Pakistani history, such as the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance (1961), declaring it un-Islamic, and was among the principal political and ideological supporters of General Zia-ul-Haq’s Islamization project during the 1980s.

educated and professional middle- and lower-middle-class women, who entered advocacy and support groups while “straddling formal politics and individual piety” (Jamal 2012, 106). This marked a shift from previous engagements, as they embraced a new self-awareness of women as active participants of political and social life, extending their role beyond philanthropy and religious education. Against this backdrop, the *Aurat March*’s deliberate distancing from NGOs, political parties and corporations constitutes an important and strategic political stance. It reflects both a rejection of accusations that feminism serves Western interests and a conscious attempt to avoid reproducing the forms of co-optation associated with the movement’s NGOization after the 1990s. Most significantly, like WAF before it, the *Aurat March* has refused external funding and formal political affiliations in order to preserve the integrity of its feminist vision and to cultivate an autonomous, grassroots form of feminist politics rooted in local struggles, community engagement and collective organizing.

Despite the limitations and criticism directed at the women’s movement, its work resulted in significant legal and institutional achievements, particularly over the last two decades, when, through sustained advocacy, engagement with policymakers and pressure on the state, important reforms and legal protections were secured. Notable achievements included the Protection of Women (Criminal Laws Amendment) Act (2006), which amended key provisions of the *Zina* Ordinance; the Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act (2010), the Acid Control and Acid Crime Prevention Act (2011) and subsequent landmark legislations addressing child marriage (2013), online harassment (2016) and sexual violence (2021) (Mumtaz 2021). In the same years that these reforms were achieved, a new generation of women was taking shape in Pakistan’s urban centers. With the rise of social media, new feminist collectives emerged in urban centers around issues of gender, public visibility and safety, mobility and everyday forms of gendered oppression. Initiatives such as *Girls at Dhābās* in Karachi/Lahore and The Feminist Collective in Lahore created new online and offline spaces for emerging feminist expressions among the urban youth, laying important groundwork for the emergence of the *Aurat March*.¹² As Khan (2018) notes, unlike

¹² The development of these urban collectives is further introduced and analyzed in Chapter Four.

earlier generations who experienced pre-Zia Pakistan, these young women came of age amid the enduring "corrosive effects" (5) of Islamization, reflected in conservative social norms and religious polarization, alongside contemporary challenges of political insecurity, militancy and economic precarity. Lastly, attention should be drawn to the emergence of new women's political organizations that explicitly articulated alternative ideological frameworks. In this context, in 2018 the **Women Democratic Front** (WDF), gained visibility as the women's wing of the *'Awāmī Workers Party*, distinguishing itself within the broader women's movement and political scene by advancing a socialist feminist critique of neoliberalism, imperialism and global inequalities, organizing the *Aurat Āzādī March* (Women's Liberation March) on the International Women's Day in parallel to the *Aurat March*. Before turning to the scholarship on the *Aurat March*, I will briefly examine how women's studies and feminist theorization have been conceptualized within this evolving landscape of women's activism and political mobilization in Pakistan.

1.1.3 Situating the Research within Pakistani Women's Studies

This research is situated within the rich scholarship on Women's Studies, in particular the body of knowledge produced by activists and scholars associated with the Pakistani women's movement that took shape during the 1980s, largely composed by urban upper-middle-class women who had been actively involved in the mobilisation against the authoritarian regime of General Zia-ul-Haq (1978-88). In the decades that followed, through the establishment of organizations, research centers and publishing houses, these women addressed the lack of feminist theorization on Pakistani women, articulating important contributions that addressed several issues from a feminist lens and that challenged simplistic representation (and misrepresentation) of women (Ahmad 2010, 2).

It is important to say that, although the government promoted Women's Studies through the establishment of the Women's Studies Centers in public universities in 1989, the

institutionalization of discipline remained limited and uneven across Pakistan.¹³ Hampered by insufficient state funding, weak institutional backing, and a lack of intellectual and institutional support from university departments, these centres rarely developed into vibrant academic spaces (Saigol 2005). Consequently, much of Pakistan's feminist knowledge production and critical engagement with women's issues can be found within the work of the non-governmental and private sectors, through organizations established and led by activists associated with WAF. As Saigol observes (2005), one of WAF's defining characteristics has been its commitment to a "dialectical relation between theory and practice, action and reflection" (349), whereby activism has been combined with study, analysis, and collective intellectual engagement and production of knowledge. Feminist theorization thus emerged from the 1980s not through strictly academic inquiry, but also through institutions that deliberately linked scholarship to political, cultural, social, legal and artistic practice.

A prominent example is the Lahore-based Applied Socio-Economic Research (ASR) and its affiliated institute of Women's Studies of Lahore (ISWL), founded by WAF member Nighat Said Khan. Beyond offering teaching programmes with a transnational team of scholars, ASR/IWSL developed an extensive agenda of feminist research and knowledge dissemination, publishing influential writings by feminists from the Global South and bringing into scholarly reflection issues of militarism, discriminatory laws, and social and economic injustice¹⁴. Alongside ASR/IWSL, Simorgh Women's Resource and Publication Centre, Shirkat Gah and the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) made important contributions to feminist theorization through research on gender, law, education, citizenship, militarism, and conflict. Through publications, training initiatives, workshops, and forums, they created space for critical reflection while simultaneously grounding their work in community engagement, reinforcing the

¹³ Established in 1989 by the Women's Development Division, the Women's Studies Centres aimed to institutionalize Women's Studies within public universities by revising curricula, promoting research on women and development, fostering debate on women's issues, and making women's contributions more visible in academic knowledge production (Saigol 2005)

¹⁴ ASR/IWSL not only published major international and Pakistani feminist scholarship, but also a number of important co-edited volumes which reflected the collaborative intellectual work of feminist activists, artists and scholars, many of whom linked to WAF. Among the publications, *Locating the Self* (1994), *Unveiling the Issues: Pakistani Women's Perspectives on Social, Political and Ideological Issues* (1995) and *A celebration of Women. Essays and Abstracts from the Women's Studies Conference* (1995)

distinctive character of Pakistani feminism in which knowledge production is closely intertwined with activism and social change.

The emerging body of works generated important theorizations exploring and shedding light onto different intersecting aspects of gendered, classed, and socio-cultural oppressions affecting women in the country, developing the analysis of identity politics, state nationalism and religious discourses, local constructions of patriarchy, male violence and militarism (Hussain, Mumtaz, Saigol 1997). What emerges from this rich scholarship is the need to acknowledge the multiple locations of Pakistani women, who navigate intersecting and often conflicting identity discourses, within which they “negotiate their sense of self among and with each other” (Khan, Saigol and Zia 1994, 18). Research in this area addresses the epistemological importance to attend and to foreground “the experiential and biographical” (Rouse 2004, 69) dimensions of women’s lives and local contexts in order to challenge the delegitimization of women’s voices and experiences and to understand how different encounters with patriarchy produce different forms of struggles. Importantly, yet frequently underexamined in current studies, this scholarship highlights the centrality of artistic and cultural production to the ways upper-class Pakistani women have articulated their feminist agencies. Within a vibrant cultural milieu of women poets, visual artists and performers, art played a crucial role in the theorization of feminism and in shaping this emerging body of works as an inherent creative project and process of exchange and learning (Khan, Saigol and Zia 1995). In situating my work within this scholarship, I foreground the continued significance of artistic and cultural production as inherently political and a site of feminist engagement in these segments of the Pakistani women’s movement.

Furthermore, this body of work has played a crucial role in producing first-hand accounts and historical analyses of the Pakistani women’s movement, written by activists who had participated in these struggles. A landmark study is *Women of Pakistan: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back?* (Mumtaz and Shaheed 1987), which provides one of the earliest analyses of the emergence of the movement in Pakistan and its political battles. Subsequent writings by members of the Women’s Action Forum further documented the evolution of the movement, its challenges, and internal debates and strategies

(Shaheed *et al.* 1998; Khan 2018; Khan and Kirmani 2018; Saigol 2013; Zia 2018). Although this scholarship carries mostly the perspective and experiences of urban, educated activists, lacking an analysis of the trajectories and lived experiences of women across class, ethnicity and urban-rural divides, it nonetheless provided a pioneering documentation of the evolution, challenges, internal diversity as well as contributed meaningfully to feminist theorizations in the region. It also contributed to important attempts to periodize the trajectories of women's mobilizations in the country, in which *Aurat March* would later situate itself. From post-independence APWA's work towards reforms on social welfare, education and family, through the confrontational anti-Zia street politics across the 1980s led by WAF and *Sindhiyānī Tehrīk*, to the professionalisation of activism (and its depoliticization) into gender development programs supported by national and international institutions, scholars have documented the evolving paths and strategies of women activists (Saigol 2020; Khan 1995).

This body of scholarship has also paid significant attention to the meanings and forms of the women's movement, especially in the years preceding the emergence of *Aurat March* in Pakistan's political landscape. In *The Women's Movement in Pakistan* (2018) Ayesha Khan described the general concerns among veteran activists regarding generational gaps, lack of strategies, and modes of mobilization. Similarly, Rubina Saigol (2016) had questioned the existence of an autonomous women's movement due to the lack of young women's voices in the country and the fragmentation of confrontational activism into programs of women's empowerment. In this regard, Farida Shaheed pointed at the increasing relevance of "gray areas" of gender politics such as NGO initiatives and international agencies' programs, where, however, women would tend to distance themselves from feminism and frame their work as women's empowerment against a male-dominated society (Shaheed 2010).

As mentioned earlier, this body of literature has been reproducing the analysis of urban upper-class women and, being mostly produced in English, its circulation remained limited to an international, anglophone audience. The contributions by other actors, particularly rural and working class women heading from different provinces, have often

remained less visible or underexamined by mainstream scholarship (Rouse 2004). Some accounts on grassroot women's mobilizations have been explored by the same scholars, who pointed at the significant works of less visible gender-based struggles, such as those of *Okāra* peasant movements and the Lady's Health Workers, Pashtun women or Transgender activism (Saeed 2020, Khan and Kirmani 2018, Zia 2020). The aforementioned *Sindhiyānī Tehrīk* has likewise received relatively limited comparative scholarly attention, although a number of recent studies have addressed this gap (Ahmad 2025).¹⁵ The emergence of *Aurat March* has generated renewed scholarly interest in feminist mobilization in Pakistan, prompting both established and emerging scholars to revisit earlier debates about the nature, transformations and future trajectories of the women's movements, while also introducing new radical perspectives to its analysis (Rehman 2021). It is within this evolving scholarly debate that the present study situates itself. In the following section, I turn specifically to the emerging literature on the *Aurat March* and outline how this thesis seeks to contribute and redirect its analysis.

1.1.4 Theorizing Contemporary Feminist Politics of Aurat March

Since its inception in 2019, the *Aurat March* has attracted widespread public attention and generated an expanding body of media coverage and scholarly analysis, both in the country and internationally, reinvigorating debates on Pakistani feminism. Many of these initial works explored the way the *March* has unsettled the country's public sphere, producing a radical shift of the existing feminist discourses and practices (Dossa 2022; Saigol 2020). This "regeneration of feminism" (Batool and Malik 2021) marked a radical departure from previous forms of women's mobilizations and political engagement, particularly with respect to the historical praxis of upper-class women and its later development and depoliticization (Batool 2020; Munir and Imran 2018; Riaz 2025).

¹⁵ See also Sodhar Muhammad Qasim's *Feminism and the Struggle of Sindhyani Tehreek* (2021), a substantial and important contribution to the study of women's activism and rural movements in Pakistan with a focus on the Sindhyani Tehreek. The work is available only in Sindhi language, which has limited its accessibility to non-Sindhi readers.

Much of the emerging scholarship has focused on the *Aurat March*'s contentious character, particularly examining the discourses articulated through slogans written in placards, framing these as the movement's most debated elements¹⁶. By vernacularizing feminist discourse and situating it within locally embedded idioms and references, these elements produced a linguistic and semiotic shift (Zubair 2022) that was received with intense backlash across traditional and online media. Within this context, several studies have examined different dimensions of this phenomenon, mostly deploying textual, media and discourse analysis. Shehr Bano Zaidi (2024) emphasized the relationship between the *Aurat March* and countermovements such as *Hayā March* showing how political sloganeering articulates competing political positions. Similarly, Daanika Kamal (2021) examined the centrality of networked digital struggles within which placards become sites for the production and circulation of anti-feminist discourses. The significant work of Zainab Alam (2021) underscored the necessity to read the backlash generated by slogans and placards as a form of violence against women in politics, while Abbas, Lashari and Wakil (2025) shifted the focus on the way *Aurat March* volunteers adopted strategies to counter and respond to such attacks. Beside this, other studies have examined the contentious broader social impact and public reception of the *Aurat March* (Nadeem et al. 2024; Umar 2024), exploring the role of digital activism in challenging patriarchal norms and reshaping gender discourse in Pakistan (Aslam et al. 2025), or by highlighting the tensions between women's right advocacy and conservative religious perspectives in shaping public debates (Haidar and Ahmad 2024). Moving beyond debates about public reception, the *Aurat March*'s positioning has also been explored in relation to Islamic feminist perspectives, highlighting points of engagement and tension (Khushbakht and Sultana 2023; Saeed et al. 2021). Overall, much of the existing scholarship has approached the march by exploring its controversial character, digital presence, public visibility and its contentious feminist discourse. These studies, I argue, tend to treat the movement as a single,

¹⁶ Aurat March slogans addressed several aspects of patriarchy, particularly its intimate and domestic manifestations on gender control. The most controversial usually equated with the movement's politics, *Mera Jism Meri Marzi* (My body, My Choice) focuses on bodily autonomy, while slogans such as *Apna Khana Khud Garm Karo* (Heat up your own food) and *Mujhe kiya maloom tumhara mauza kahan hai* (How should I know where your sock is?) critique unequal labour division, male privilege and entitlement. *Mein Awaara, Mein Badchalan* (I loiter, I'm characterless) reclaimed a term historically used to morally police women's mobility, asserting the right to occupy public spaces while challenging patriarchal norms.

unified entity, largely bypassing the internal dynamics of different city chapters, the micro-scale forms of organizing, and the distinctive communities of volunteers that sustain and imagine it throughout the year, beyond the public performance of the 8th of March. While important exceptions exist, particularly anthologies and reflections produced by senior activists and newer participants which offer insightful analysis of the movement, its challenges, and transformations (see for example Rehman 2021), these accounts remain less compared to the above mentioned scholarly work. Furthermore, by focusing primarily on the movement's annual demonstration as a site of political controversy, less attention has been given to the volunteers' everyday practices, their less visible collective labour, relational, and affective dimensions through which patriarchy is contested and feminist politics is imagined and cultivated.

This dissertation addresses this gap by exploring *Aurat March* not only as a public performance but also, and mainly, as a community of volunteers shaped by relationships, creative and performative engagements, and specific spatial trajectories. This research shifts attention to the less visible processes through which volunteers sustain and build the movement and articulate feminist politics, revealing how agency emerges within everyday individual and collective practices of care and solidarity.

In this study, I argue that artistic and cultural expression offers an important lens for understanding women's agential practices. Agency, understood as "the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act" (Ahearn 2001,110) embedded within power relations and inextricable from its context, has been often examined through conventional forms of political action or protest communication. However, I argue that when the analysis of agency is limited to these forms, many of the ways through which political subjectivities are produced and enacted remain overlooked. Against this backdrop, this study highlights the projective, performative, and creative dimensions of women's agency, through which they articulate feminist resistance within broader socio-cultural patriarchal structures. Through this perspective, this study seeks to address how women's creative engagements, in the forms of embodied performances, artworks, collective chants, and songs, become contextually and politically meaningful, illustrating how political agency and creativity intersect in the everyday enactment of politics. To analyse and address these dimensions, while existing scholarship has largely relied on content and discourse

analysis of the movement's politics or its public reception, this study draws on anthropology studies on the aesthetics of political movements, feminist geography, urban scholarship on space and gender, and performance studies. Applied across the three chapters, these frameworks allow to explore different intersecting political aspects of the *Aurat March* as a community, a movement, and a public performance, weaving together volunteers' personal struggles and collective actions.

This lens also addresses the limited attention in existing scholarship, aside from a few contributions (Amir 2021), to the vernacular and regional forms of cultural expression within the *Aurat March*. My approach highlights their significance and examines how these expressions are politically reworked within contemporary feminist politics. This perspective echoes Farida Shaheed's argument that "creative arts combined with retrieving historical and cultural traditions that resonate with people" should be emphasized as both terrains of political feminist practice and object of scholarly inquiry (20). Attending to the cultural and expressive dimensions of *Aurat March* Lahore illustrates how such practices enable alternative ways of understanding feminist agency beyond binary frameworks, such as religious/secular, local/global, traditional/modern, foregrounding instead how cultural repertoires are mobilized to root and articulate situated forms of political expressions and belonging. In particular, this study seeks to depart from the binary lens of secular (liberal, western) versus religious (pious, islamic) feminism through which women's movements and women's agential practices in the region have been analysed (Zia 2020), a framework that, as Khan and Kirmani (2018) note, has at times been reinforced by women's collectives themselves.

By focusing on artistic and cultural practices, this study proposes to rethink how feminist genealogies can be conceptualized, tracing historical entanglements beyond linear periodizations and grounding them in how volunteers reinterpret and situate themselves through the mobilization of past feminist expressive repertoires. Furthermore, this approach brings into view the political significance of the relational and affective dimensions that sustain the community of volunteers. While recent South Asian scholarship has showcased the historical importance of friendship in building and maintaining feminist alliances across borders, overcoming political tensions and

hostilities (Chhachhi and Abeysekera 2015; Kanagasabai and Phadke 2023) this dimension has received little attention in studies of the *Aurat March*.

Finally, some studies have reflected on the challenges faced by the movement, assessing its achievements and outcomes over the years (Sarwar and Huma 2021; Rafaqat, Shabbir and Kumari 2024). This praxis, however, raises critical questions about how the movement's success is defined and evaluated, and who defines or measures it, a concern recently pointed out by *Aurat March* volunteers themselves (*Aurat March* Lahore 2025)¹⁷. While not explicitly addressing this question, this research situates success in those processes that volunteers experience as significant, meaningful and transformative, unfolding in their lived experiences, underpinning their relationships and affects. As articulated by *Aurat March* Lahore volunteers:

"Success (...) can be seen in the way our movements help transform our lives, establish mutual trust, and provide emotional support. These outcomes are visible only if we shift the scale to the micro-spaces generated by our coming together, where healing takes the form of celebration and mourning, where we can be loud when society silences us, where we forge solidarities that break the walls of isolation, trauma, fear, and violence." (*Aurat March* Lahore 2025)

By foregrounding these dimensions, this study contributes to wider scholarship on feminist theory and gender studies across South Asia and the Global South, while seeking to complicate our understanding of the relationship between feminism, artistic practices, affects and cultural production in contemporary articulations of feminist politics in Pakistan.

1.1.5 Terminological Choices

Before proceeding to outline the methodology, I briefly present key terminological definitions and choices. In this analysis, I distinguish between participants of the *March*, those who join the demonstration on the International Women's Day, from those involved in organizing it. For the latter, I use the term volunteers rather than "organizers" or "activists": organizers can be ambiguous, as it encompasses also those volunteers less actively involved in the event, while activists is less commonly used in this context

¹⁷ <https://narivaad.com/the-measure-of-a-movement/>

and carries stronger performative connotations and roles. This choice reflects my need to align to the terminology used by the women with whom I conducted my research, who would majorly deploy this term as part of their politics. While inevitably some women take on more organizational responsibilities than others, the use of the term by volunteers frame their ideological stand of seeking not to assume a group hierarchical structure, in line with feminist principles of horizontality. Talking about volunteers also serves as a strategic response to public backlash which has previously attempted to single out and target specific members, identified as “leaders” of the organizing group, which often led to life threatening heavy accusations. On the other hand, I used the terms marchers or participants to refer to those who joined the march on the day of the event.

With regard to language and transliteration of Urdu (and occasionally Punjabi), I adopt two different approaches depending on the context of use. Whenever reporting ethnographic material written by volunteers, such as texts of vernacular rhymes, social media post, Whatsapp conversations, or particular recurrent words (such as tappay, pidarshahi, dholki, and behenchara) that circulate within the movement, I retain the spellings used by volunteers themselves. This choice reflects my intention to preserve the forms through which volunteers write these terms, allowing the thesis to report how language circulates within the specific social and linguistic context in which the community builds meanings and representations. These terms also appear with different spellings and linguistic variations across materials, (particularly in online conversations), which points to the heterogeneous ways in which language circulates, and reflecting volunteers’ different linguistic practices, educational backgrounds, subcultural affiliation and class positions.

In the transcriptions of interviews, recorded interactions, as well as material not originally written by volunteers (such as poetry, song lyrics) and the material I recorded during my fieldwork (such as slogans, interactions), I employ the transliteration system used in *A Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi, and English* by John T. Platts (Platts 2003). This system allows for a more systematic and intelligible rendering of Urdu

terms, particularly for those readers who are alien to this particular socio-cultural context, while distinguishing them from the vernacular spellings used by volunteers.

1.2 Doing Research with *Aurat March*: A Feminist Methodology

1.2.1 Mapping the fieldwork methodology

The research is based on a total of around eleven months of fieldwork conducted intermittently between 2022 and 2024 mostly in Lahore. My approach combined ethnographic participation, in-depth discursive interviews, and the analysis of digital materials, including WhatsApp group chats and content posted on the *Aurat March*'s Instagram page. During field visits, I conducted ethnographic research by attending the *Aurat March*'s meetings, workshops, outreach activities, and fundraising events leading to the annual march, which generally took place between January and March each year. My access to the field began through online contact prior to my first visit to Lahore. I first met volunteers in February 2022 during a banner and art making activity in a park, after which I attended subsequent meetings, gradually getting to know the volunteers through casual conversations. This initial visit, which lasted nearly one and a half months, allowed me to connect with artists, who initially constituted the main focus of my research design, and was important to familiarize myself with the city and the research context. The first march I attended in 2022, although I was already part of the volunteer's group, was mostly experienced as an outsider, as my understanding of the movement was still limited. The second visit, from late October 2022 to mid-March 2023, was the longest. As much of the collective's activity would have begun only in January 2023, I used the preceding months to refine my research objectives and questions, while maintaining contact with some volunteers and conducting preliminary readings, accessing books and resources that were not accessible outside Pakistan. This time was precious for getting to know more the feminist political scene of Pakistan in other cities too: during this period I visited Karachi and Islamabad, where I met other collectives and women active in activist and art circles, which allowed me to deepen my understanding of feminist activism operating in other cities. From January to March

2023, my engagement with the *Aurat March* in Lahore became significant and relevant: I developed closer relationships with volunteers and the city, enabling more in-depth fieldwork, active participation as a volunteer, and first relevant interviews. During this period, I got more involved in the documentation of the movement, defining my role as a researcher carrying photo-documentation across meetings and events, such as the fundraising (feminist *dholki*). In September 2023, I returned for a shorter, one month-visit, which offered additional opportunities for interactions and interviews with volunteers during a less busy period, as their schedules had previously been constrained by pre-march preparations and, immediately afterward, by the month of *Ramzān*. This was also one reason why many interviews were conducted online while I was back in Europe, with volunteers with whom I had already shared intensive experiences during the *March* and its preparations in Lahore¹⁸. My final fieldwork took place from January to March 2024, by which time I had developed closer relationships, and in some cases close friendships, with the volunteers and became more actively involved in the community. During this period, I took more part in activities such as workshops and outreach events in some localities around Lahore, feeling personally more involved with their work. It also provided an opportunity to expand my understanding of other student and political activist groups in the city that that year, due to the theme¹⁹, were in contact with the *March*. Interviews continued beyond this fieldwork period, with the last conducted in October 2024.

The analysis of the fieldwork notes, interviews, online content and the audio-visual material I produced, drew on a combination of interpretative feminist methods (Wickramasinghe 2014) and grounded theory (Charmaz 2014). Feminist methodology allowed me to focus on participants' interpretations of their experiences and the meanings they attached to their practices, situating these within broader social and political contexts. Following Wickramasinghe (2014), I approach feminist methodology

¹⁸Another factor was that traveling within Lahore was often time-consuming and costly for many volunteers. Most of all, many of them frequently had to negotiate with their families their outings, and faced constraints that made meeting outside the home difficult, particularly in the late afternoon or evening, while during the day they were occupied with work or university commitments.

¹⁹ The theme of Aurat March Lahore 2024 was *Siyāsāt, Muzāḥamat, Āzādī* (Politics, Resistance, Liberation). Through this focus, volunteers framed multiple struggles within Pakistan as interconnected, including those of baloch and pashtun women, while also expressing solidarity with transnational causes such as Palestinian resistance.

not merely as a set of tools, but as a framework encompassing methods and epistemology, requiring ongoing reflection on my own subjectivity, positionality and ethical commitments throughout the research process and aimed at transformatory and emancipatory research. Grounded Theory situated my materials within an inductive analytical strategy aimed at identifying emerging categories and shared themes across the data while reducing a theoretical over-determinism, allowing concepts to arise from participant's narratives and interactions.

1.2.2. Interviews and Field Conversations

This thesis presents a total of 24 interviews, including 21 women from *Aurat March* and 3 from Women's Action Forum in Lahore, selected from an initial pool of 46 interviews. The remaining participants were artists and a few volunteers I met in Lahore in 2022, before the research designs and the interview framework were finalized, as well as feminist activists from *Aurat March* and other feminist collectives whom I encountered in other cities. The interviews were conducted in a mix of Urdu and English, the languages majorly spoken by them²⁰, allowing volunteers to choose the language they wished to use and to switch between them freely. The interviews, ranging from one to one and a half hours, were always audio-recorded, allowing me to fully attend to participants' narratives, words, expressions, tone and emotions during the process. While the data produced are not intended to be generalizable or representative to all women of the group, I sought to include participants with varying ages, background, professional or educational history, class position, and levels of involvement in the collective in order to build analytical depth. At the same time, the research was also informed by conversations, interviews and encounters with women who were part of the feminist political milieu, supporting or participating in other activist spaces and organisations. These included members of older activist groups, such as Women's Action Forum in

²⁰ Punjabi, as will be evident throughout the thesis, was spoken and understood to varying degrees. In most cases, volunteers could understand Punjabi but could not speak fluently, and mostly they did not use it regularly, particularly in interactions among themselves. Many volunteers from Punjabi-speaking families had also attended English or Urdu medium schools, where Punjabi was not permitted, and therefore in some cases had heard it at home or as they grew up decided to learn it. Beside this, my understanding of Punjabi was also very limited.

Lahore, activists of *Aurat Āzādī March* (which I attended in 2023) and feminist art collective *Akeli Larkyan* in Islamabad, and other activists and artists from *Aurat March* Karachi. Developing networks across different activists and groups beyond the volunteers was important in situating the *March* within the broader political and feminist landscape of Lahore and the country, where multiple struggles and forms of feminist activism operated and intersected. It is also important to note that this thesis captures a snapshot of some aspects of the movement at a particular moment in its trajectory, and therefore reflects one instance of its ongoing evolution and transformation. Over the years, circumstances and events changed, as did the trajectories of many participants, who married, moved to different cities, or abroad, for work or for education, while others disengaged from the collective, also, not least due to being overwhelmed or moments of burn out. Most interviews were conducted during the second and third years of research, after spending time with volunteers and sharing experiences. In some cases relationships extended beyond the context of the march, and I spent time with a few volunteers occasionally meeting in the city or attending events together, fostering deeper exchanges and mutual affection and closeness. While I interviewed both volunteers with whom I had developed closer relationships and those with whom I had interacted less frequently, I acknowledge that these relational dynamics inevitably informed my interactions as well as the depth of reflections that differently emerged in the interviews and presented in the thesis. The broader political context and the risks faced by volunteers, such as threats, harassment and accusations, shaped the conditions under which my fieldwork and interviews were conducted. Some participants were hesitant to discuss issues both related to state and gender politics, or entering in details about their activism (particularly when intersecting other groups), preferred online interviews without showing their faces, or avoided particular "sensitive" topics. As Ammar Ali Jan argues (2021), fear is a structural political strategy produced by the state (as well as parallel extra-state actors) through intimidation, surveillance and repression of political dissent, which has led to false accusations of sedition, terrorism or blasphemy, the last particularly against the *Aurat March*. Although the majority of the volunteers came from upper-middle-class Punjabi muslim backgrounds, and thus belonged to privileged groups compared to many other activists in the country, they

remained exposed to forms of state and extra-state patriarchal violence. Private threats, online and physical harassment from individuals and religious right-wing groups, and the possibility of mob violence were part of the environment they had to navigate, often overlapping with family moral condemnations of being associated with the *Aurat March*.

Interviews took place both in person and online, depending on participants' wishes, circumstances, and practical considerations. Beside those conducted online due to physical constraints, as I was no longer in Pakistan, sometimes arranging in-person meetings in Lahore proved to be difficult due to volunteers' busy schedules, mobility constraints, and several gendered challenges women often face in navigating urban space. The majority of volunteers were students or working women, making daytime meetings difficult, while evening settings were not always feasible due to safety concerns of the participants or their families (especially the younger ones), along with the challenges of navigating distances in the city. Financial constraints, in fact, also played a role, as rides on taxis/cabs were perceived as expensive and not all volunteers were used to taking them, as they were perceived unsafe. While several volunteers drove their family car (mostly those who worked), rising petrol prices and inflation made regular travel increasingly costly, further limiting mobility options. As a result, interviews were often arranged close to participants' homes, at their workplaces or nearby cafes. When they took place at their homes, this was generally because their families were aware of their involvement with *Aurat March* and had been informed about my research. For some participants, therefore, online interviews emerged as a more accessible and flexible alternative. At the same time, conducting online interviews from home did not necessarily ensure privacy, as participants whose parents were not aware of their activism had to find appropriate spaces and moments within the household to be able to speak freely.

I employed **in-depth discursive interviews** (Faccioli 2007) to explore topics central to my research questions, focusing on volunteer's experiences, biographies, and participation in the movement, reflecting on this also by including materials produced during my fieldwork as prompts for discussions. Discursive interviews can be

understood as sites where social meanings and interpretations are co-constructed between researcher and participant (Ullrich 2022). Faccioli (2007) describes such moments as "communicative situations" which, unlike structured interviews, surveys, and questionnaires, are aimed at reducing researcher directivity, allowing for the exploration of participants' representations of experiences, meaning-making processes, relational dynamics, and value frameworks. After an initial broad question asking participants to introduce themselves, the interviews were not rigidly structured but organised around broad thematic areas, where participants were invited to discuss aspects of their upbringing, volunteer work and participation in *Aurat March* activities and spatial politics, which would have been brought into the conversation, but leaving them to guide the conversation. Following Meraviglia (2005), the interviews were conducted with a low degree of structure, directivity and standardization: while topics were generally defined beforehand, the conversation was allowed to flow freely, enabling participants to share their experiences, sensations, and memories, to decide what was most relevant for them.

Rather than bringing inputs in different directions, I tried to employ mirror-questions to ask volunteers to expand their narrative by echoing their words, gestures, without directing the conversations or sharing my interpretations. The interviews attempted to let participants narrate their experience with minimal interruption, leaving time and space to their rhythms, flows of thoughts, expressions, emotions, silences and pauses. Intimacy and depth of interviews emerged differently across interactions. Regardless of whether interviews were conducted online or in person, and to a certain extent also irrespective of how familiar I had become at a personal level with volunteers, what I felt that shaped the affective tone and possibilities of opening up depended on many intersecting aspects. Among these, not only the connection that I had developed with participants prior to the interview, but also how the interaction unfolded during the interview itself. This seemed to depend less on rational consideration and more on relational factors, such as empathy and mutual understanding, affective resonance, how we felt in the presence of one another: aspects that are difficult to fully define but nonetheless shape the interaction in insignificant ways. It follows that interviews did not follow a linear trajectory: in some cases, there were moments of unexpectedly deep

exchange even when the interview constituted our first encounter, for example with artists who were not actively part of the organizational structure of the march.

1.2.3 Visual research methods

Within this framework, the methodology of this study is grounded in **visual research methods** as interpretative tools (Banks 2001, Margolis and Pauwels 2011; Pink 2013), both to examine volunteers' experiences within interviews and to document the collective's work, across the phases of organization until the march.

As noted earlier, my access to the field as a volunteer-researcher was also mediated through audio-visual work. The photographs and videos I produced for the research were likewise shared with the collective as part of their archive and internal documentation. While I carried participatory observation and active participation during most of the meetings and activities, in some of them, and especially events like the *dholki* and the *Aurat March*, I took part by documenting with the camera. As Sarah Pink (2013) argues, visual ethnographic material can simultaneously function as visual representations of the researcher's own social experience and as personal documents embedded in social relations. In this sense, the intentions guiding my work were often simultaneously "personal, artistic and ethnographic" (57). Video and photography functioned as visual recording methods through which performances, volunteers, gestures, events and practices could be documented and later analysed, while acknowledging the subjective perspective and the selective nature of these representations. Decisions about what to frame often involved choices and attempts to bring together aesthetic considerations and the need to document interactions or moments that I considered analytically significant. For instance, during a sudden confrontation between a volunteer and a media anchor, I approached and photographed the scene from a close angle, emphasizing the tension and contentious emotions between the two, while excluding the broader context in which other Youtubers and volunteers were present. During the intimate context of the *dholki*, the necessity to avoid recording faces (mostly in relation to the dissemination of the material) led me to focus on many objects and details, which while still being extremely relevant, constructed a

more fragmented scene than broader landscape frames. In contrast to this, recording was more complex during the marches: capturing some instances and scenes inevitably meant not witnessing other situations firsthand, requiring me to rely on material produced by other volunteers and participants (such as in the video of the *tappay* in 2023). For this reason, during the last *Aurat March* I attended, documentation tasks were divided among me and other two male volunteers²¹, covering different areas simultaneously and using diverse methods, either filming or taking photos, making the process easier.

In the context of interviews described above, I drew on **photo-elicitation** (Harper 2002), using visual material, such as photographs and videos from the march or the *dholki*, social media content, artworks and related materials, as prompts during interviews. These visuals, produced both by myself during fieldwork and by volunteers (for example posters and artworks), functioned as a central component of the research process, inviting volunteers to engage and discuss meanings, experiences, memories and perspective. Visual prompts have been used in visual sociology and anthropology for their capacity to elicit different kinds of information that might not emerge through spoken or written questions alone (Ibid.) Visuals in interviews often described as “multisensory artifacts” evoking “multisensory experiences” beyond the vision (Pink 2011, 608), enabling conversations to expand around participants' ways of looking at their experiences, and encouraging more affective and reflective forms of narrations (Rose 2016). **Visual prompts** introduced during interviews added layers of meanings and generated new connections that I had not previously considered, shifting the tone of the discussion toward more affective registers and producing moments of heightened emotional intensity. For instance, when I shared the *Aurat March* 2023 poster, the conversation frequently moved beyond the *Aurat March* and a claim to the city, but expanded it bringing forward feelings of desire, nostalgia, and melancholia, shifting from *Aurat March* to more intimate narratives, including childhood memories, friendships, longings, personal desires of visions of Lahore. Similarly, when revisiting photos and

²¹ The day of the March was the only time in which male allies (who were previously excluded from the march's organization, open only to women and gender minorities) could take part in support roles. This involved assisting for security purposes, often in coordination with police presence, intervening when situations became more tense, or documenting the event.

videos of the march or the *dholki*, volunteers would see themselves portrayed and were moved, shifting from more distanced narrations towards more detailed reflections of the emotions experienced in those moments and lingering on their feelings. In other cases, such as looking at videos of singing of *tappay* in public, volunteers connected that to other contexts and memoirs, reflecting on their cultural and emotional significance.

Some of the ethnographic accounts found in this thesis are accompanied with visual narratives composed of sequences of images and videos taken during the fieldwork. These images have been used to present interactions, gestures, details and situations and practices, such as rituals, chants, collective dances, and marching. These small **photo-essays** (Banks 2008) serve both to accompany the ethnographic descriptions and analytical arguments of the thesis and to evoke the affective dimension of these situations.

The making and usage of photographs and videos required careful attention to the **ethics of visual research**, which posed new challenges compared to the word-based research. As pointed out by Wiles et al. (2011), ethical practice in visual methods involves not only adherence to formal guidelines (Papademas and IVSA 2009), but also sensitivity to the specific socio-political context and to participants' diverse feelings about ethical practice. Particularly, anonymity presented a challenge, not for written data but for visual material I produced in the fieldwork and in relation to its dissemination. Volunteers themselves were aware of their visibility due to multiple factors, such as the danger of being subjected to accusations and death or rape threats, as it had happened to some in the past, or the fear of being recognized by their families, some of which were not aware of their involvement in the movement. In response, I adopted measures beyond standard anonymization, both in the visual production and in its selection, following practices similar to those of the collective on social media, such as blurring or obscuring faces. In all cases, consent was discussed in the situation: women who did not wish to appear in images were excluded, and those whose faces were recorded, were assured that their identities would have been protected.

1.2.4 Research Ethics and Politics

“Why had I specifically chosen Pakistan, why *Aurat March*?” was a question that some volunteers asked me on a few occasions. Initially, I would respond by explaining how the topic reflected the convergence of my interests on this political phenomenon in South Asia and my personal, academic, and political engagement with feminist work and artistic practices. However, this question unsettled me and made me reflect on how insufficient and somewhat naive that answer sounded, not only to them, but also to myself. Over time, it prompted a broader reflection on the grids of power and hierarchies that I experienced in my fieldwork and that had enabled me, a white Italian, middle-class woman to conduct research among them in a country I had not previously visited, within a collective with whom I had no prior connections, but which had caught global attention and substantial academic interest. My research work had “naturally” positioned me in a place of relative power, allowing me, always through consent and ongoing negotiations, to enter a group of strangers and be gradually accepted within it for a defined period of time. This raised further questions: on what basis was I claiming legitimacy to be there and conduct research, especially when there were many other academic, activist local women who had more experience and expertise? Through which spaces, interactions, and symbolic or social practices was I supposed to negotiate my legitimacy? While I was working with women who, as educated upper-middle-class professionals, academics, and activists, understood my role as a researcher, the question for me was still: is a shared identification as women, with similar class backgrounds and political views and values, sufficient to render my presence and research role legitimate and, equally important for me, accepted and endorsed?

Issues of **privilege, positionality and representation** were present throughout the fieldwork, raising a set of challenges, concerns and questions. Feminist research is grounded in epistemological and methodological commitments to reflexivity in knowledge production, as has been articulated by feminist geographers (Rose 1993; England 1994; McDowell 1992; Kobayashi 2003). My biography and social location simultaneously acted as both “a condition and a restraint” (Pollock 1996, xvi) shaping

the ways I accessed the field, conducted the research work, engaged in interactions and interpretations.

Sultana (2007) emphasised that conducting ethical research, particularly in the contexts of international fieldwork, requires attentiveness to **axes of difference, inequalities, and geopolitics, across boundaries and scales**, and a need to reflect on the grids of power relations in which research is imbued. Researching feminist articulations in Pakistan inevitably raised questions about the politics of representation of research participants. Feminist epistemology, grounded in postcolonial studies, has taken oppositional standpoints to the normative western global feminist articulations, arguing against their often essentializing classist narratives conducted on women of the Global South. Recently, Rafia Zakaria (2021) called for a need for white feminism to interrogate the structural inequalities they uphold in their narratives. As argued by Chandra Talpade Mohanty in her seminal critique, Western scholarships has often explored struggles of women in the Global South with the analytical category of the “Third World” woman (Mohanty 2003, Mohanty et al. 1991) as a monolithic and oppressed victim of her society, producing homogenizing representations obscuring the complexity of women’s experiences. Along with this, postcolonial feminists have also pointed at the problematicity of how the concept of “global sisterhood”, emerging from “international feminism” rooted in western feminist episteme, has reproduced a model of center-periphery, centering a universal and ahistorical notion of patriarchy, while erasing local contexts and histories, as well as racial and class discourses (Alexander and Mohanty 1997).

Against this backdrop, I sought to approach *Aurat March* for the way it has been shaped by social-political and historical contexts, giving particular attention to the plurality of voices, multiplicity of subjectivities articulated within the movement, foregrounding situated meanings and interpretations that emerge from the volunteers’ own narratives and practices. This meant to pay importance to acknowledge and foreground the heterogeneity of women, their trajectories, recognizing that they do not constitute an uniform entity but embody diverse experiences and fights. In some contexts I confronted skepticism towards western researchers and actors from international organizations and agencies, whose work was often perceived as uprooted from the local context and

whose extractive nature would not really contribute to a reciprocal exchange or aim to long and structural change. On one occasion, an activist belonging to another feminist organization whose work was under close scrutiny by state authorities declined to meet me, showing safety concerns but also suspicious towards foreign actors.

Critiquing both totalizing claims to objectivity and forms of relativism that suggest a view “from everywhere and nowhere” (1988, 584), Donna Haraway argues that responsible, or accountable, knowledge production must be understood as “locatable”, or “situated”, and therefore necessarily partial. In this sense, my research unfolded from my location and embodied subjective experience as simultaneously a researcher and volunteer. Conducting research while participating in the collective's activities was both enriching and challenging. As Liz Bondi points out, research is inherently “emotional in nature” (2007, 14): friendships, care and affection sustained my engagement with the field, while the intensity I experienced in sharing collective moments (of humor, celebration, anger) also re-directed my questions and assigned centrality to the role of emotions in my work. Alongside these moments, I often grappled with feelings of inadequacy regarding my position with the group, tending to measure my ethnographic “success” on the basis of my access to more intimate spaces of political interactions and coordination among long-standing volunteers and friends, or beyond the collective formal activities. My Italian passport placed me in a privileged and uncomfortable position, allowing me to be part of the collective while researching, while retaining the freedom to leave, in contrast to volunteers and friends who faced structural barriers to get visas to travel or study abroad, and navigated daily challenges such as rising inflation, political instability, systemic gendered oppression, professional uncertainty and, not least, family pressures. These issues prompted me to reflect on how such privilege might have been addressed through forms of reciprocity and practical help. Beyond my being a volunteer, I tried to support volunteers and friends in sharing information about educational programs, offering guidance and help with applications, connecting to opportunities and helping to promote their personal work.

As articulated by Kobayashi (2003), self-reflexivity alone might not be sufficient if it does not question and engage with the wider institutional, political and academic contexts

within which knowledge is produced. Towards the end of my fieldwork, a conversations with older feminist Punjabi activists made me reflect on how my work, despite critical intentions, still contributed in the reproduction of already visible and privileged sectors of political dissent, this sidelining and overlooking more already peripheral narratives and stories, including Punjabi movements, often middle or working class, but also the struggles from marginalized “peripheries” such as Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK). Conducting research in English and Urdu, the languages of the educated or upper classes (or of the “colonialists”, as many friends from other provinces described them), coupled with my lack of knowledge of indigenous languages further reinforced the mainstream, anglicized narratives, reinforcing patterns of exclusions mostly along class and ethnic lines. Visweswaran (1988) argued that research should not merely aim to produce more accurate or effective representations of people, but must also ask whether scholars can be accountable “to people’s own struggles for self-representation and self-determination” (39). In my work, this meant reflecting on how my academic outputs engaged with, supported and highlighted the volunteers’ own efforts to represent themselves and their activism. Ethically and politically, it was important for me to focus and research on aspects that were meaningful to them, building on their personal reflections of their politics, which often expressed a desire and a need to move beyond sensationalised and controversial narratives offered in some scholarship and media. This led me to foreground less visible dimensions of the collective and their personal lives, the everyday practices, emotions, relationships and affective dimensions that sustained the community, beyond the march.

1.2.5 On Sisterhood and Solidarity

I did not see my fieldwork as separable from my political commitments and beliefs, particularly given my “double location” as both researcher and volunteer. In this sense, my work draws on the idea of an “active, politically committed, morally engaged anthropology” as articulated by Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1995, 415). Scheper-Hughes argued that the researcher is not simply observer, but someone who “witness”, a role that “positions the anthropologist inside human events as a responsible, reflexive, and

morally committed being, one who will ‘take sides’ and make judgments” (Scheper-Hughes 1995, 419). In a context shaped by patriarchal power structures and deep social inequalities, not taking an explicit stand in my academic journey and in fieldwork would not have been neutrality, but rather a form of disengagement implicitly reproducing the very system we seek to challenge.

Returning to the question I was posed, it was important in making me reflect on how to navigate the unequal power relations in which I stood, while also finding a terrain from which to build the research amid the complexity of the field. What remained important for me, however, was thinking about my role and positionality, approaching the research as a process of learning, participation, and support, grounded in shared commitment to fight against patriarchal oppression. As Khan, Saigol and Zia argued in *“Locating the Self”* (1994), the need to theorize Women’s Studies in Pakistan has to go through the recognition that “knowledge arises in social, personal and political concerns. It originates in human fears, insecurities, needs, desires and subjectivity” (13). Building on this perspective, feminist research foregrounds the subjective and intuitive dimensions of knowledge, reconnecting feelings with thought and emphasizing the importance of values, beliefs and commitment in research, acting for change and cultivating feminist solidarity. This solidarity that I tried to practice during my fieldwork, I argue, required a shift from the idea of a presumed common oppression to one of “common differences” (Mohanty 2003, 55), fostering a solidarity that “looks into history and politics” (Richer-Devroe 2018, 33) acknowledging historical and experiential specificities. As bell hooks contended, solidarity, more than be rooted in shared geographical backgrounds, should foreground “a community of interests, shared beliefs and goals around which to unite” (hooks, 1984, 64), where diversity and disagreement become sources to grow:

“Women do not need to eradicate differences to feel solidarity. We do not need to share common oppression to fight equally to end oppression. We do not need anti-male sentiments to bond us together, so great is the wealth of experience, culture, and ideas we have to share with one another. We can be sisters united by shared interests and beliefs, united in our appreciation for diversity, united in our struggle to end sexist oppression, united in political solidarity” (Ibid, 65)

This solidarity, what volunteers called *behenchara* (sisterhood), was grounded in mutuality, unconditional support, shared values, and a space unlike any where women

were supported, trusted, encouraged to be themselves and face their personal and collective struggles. During my fieldwork, I grew through ongoing discussions with volunteers about the emotions that sustained us or brought us down, celebrating our friendship, our beliefs and dreams, and the struggles and excitement in organizing. These bonds of sisterhood and friendship sustained the group across the challenges faced in the years, and me, personally and academically. In march 2024 I had the privilege of illustrating the main poster for the march, dedicated to *Siyāsat, Muzāḥamat, Āzādī* (Politics, Resistance, Liberation), which brought me even more explicit thoughts about representation. Seeing the artwork circulating online, in media coverage, and being printed and carried during the march itself was deeply moving for me, particularly when seeing a replica in a painting collectively done by schoolchildren and brought to the event. Creating the poster as a volunteer made me feel how creativity and art-making was not just about personal expression, but about a process of collective engagement, of solidarity and mutual trust, of relationships and political commitments. Two years after my last march in Lahore, this work hopes, drawing on Sophie Richter Devroe's words (33), to be “not only about, but also with and for” the feminist trajectories of *Aurat March* volunteers.

1.3 Thesis Outline: A Road Map

The chapters positions artistic and cultural practices as both a lens and a site through which to analyze interrelated processes: how volunteers navigate and contest patriarchal structures and how they build feminist politics and articulate resistance. While these two processes run throughout all three chapters, each chapter foregrounds different forms of art and cultural expression, illustrating how these practices intersect with personal experience, shape the community and inform the broader politics of the movement.

Chapter 1, “Negotiating Space, Contesting Power: Women's Art and Spatial Practices in Lahore”, draws on feminist geography and the scholarship on urban

studies to examine volunteers' place-making practices as they navigate and contest patriarchy's spatial dimension in Lahore. By foregrounding both personal experiences and collective practices, the chapter explores women's spatial mobilities, paying attention to how spatial segregation and gendered violence shape their everyday trajectories in the city, across public and domestic spaces. At the same time, it interrogates how alternative practices, rooted in forms of leisure, collective loitering and friendship, are mobilized to challenge and rework spatial constraints and moral control. Throughout the chapter, visual artworks produced by volunteers, as well as by artists whose work has been inspired by *Aurat March's* politics, are examined as privileged sites through which gendered knowledge of the city grounded in personal experiences is articulated. I argue that these visual practices play a central role in envisioning alternative urban imaginaries informed by feminist visions, utopias, desires, and possibilities for inhabiting the city differently.

Chapter 2, “Celebrating Feminist Voices: Joy, Irreverence and Belonging, from the *dholki* to the Streets”, draws on resistance studies, particularly the work of Lila Abu Lughod (1986; 1990), to approach resistance as a lens for understanding the intersecting forms of power within and against which volunteers operate. Building on this, the chapter delves into how feminist resistance is enacted through creative collective cultural production across the march, online spaces and community gatherings and spaces. By centering the collective reworking of ritual cultural forms and re-writing vernacular rhymes, I explore how resistance emerges as a process of ownership and defiance, through which volunteers foregrounds affective and emotional dimensions of political engagement and unveil how power operates across social structures encompassing intimate and public spheres. Within this framework, I also address how cultural practices can be mobilized as key strategies for exposing patriarchal authority and moral hierarchies, enabling dissent to travel across different publics. Focusing on these regional repertoires, the analysis points at how resistance unfolds within processes of identity negotiations across linguistic, class and ethnic boundaries and forms of belongings.

Chapter 3, “Performing Feminist Legacies: Cultural Memory and Collective Repertoires of Resistance in *Aurat March*”, examines how volunteers situate their

work within the broader history of feminist and leftist struggle and how processes of legacy-making emerge and transform over the years. Moving beyond simple periodization, the chapter asks how feminist genealogies are produced, circulated and enacted through intergenerational encounters, creative exchanges and collective practices, highlighting the central role of affect in shaping personal and collective memory. By drawing on Taylor's concept of "repertoires" (2003), the chapter traces the ways these legacies are produced across performances, songs, poetries and dances, exploring how volunteers negotiate, commemorate and re-signify feminist memory and trace women's genealogies by linking historical struggles to contemporary modes of resistance. In this context, the chapter asks which histories of past resistances are evoked by volunteers, and how these are reinterpreted and made meaningful through performances that interweave with their personal and collective narratives of struggles and feminist world-making. Together, the chapters call attention to the transformative force of artistic and cultural practices, not only as sites where patriarchy is challenged and feminist praxis is enacted, but also as dimensions where the affective and emotional intensities that uphold, embolden and nourish feminist communities can be viscerally felt.

2. Negotiating Space, Contesting Power: Women's Art and Spatial Practices in Lahore

*“Jitnī saṛak tumhārī hai,
utnī saṛak hamārī hai!”²²*

2.1 Introduction

2.1.1 Chapter Outline

Drawing on Feminist Geography (Rose 1993; Massey 1993) and scholarship on Gender and Space in South Asia (Datta 2016; Phadke 2007, 2020; Kirmani 2020, Renade 2007, Raju 2011), this chapter foregrounds the **spatial practices** of *Aurat March* volunteers in Lahore to examine how women experience, negotiate, and contest gender power relations in which they are embedded. On the one hand, the analysis examines how women's mobilities and modes of inhabiting the city are shaped and disciplined by intersecting forms of spatial and moral regulations, including sexual violence, gendered regimes of spatial segregation and moral discourses, which operate as affective mechanisms structuring women's everyday spatial trajectories. Concurrently, it focuses on individual and collective practices through which volunteers actively reconfigure their mobilities, such as leisure and loitering, enabling them to access urban space differently, envision alternative engagements with the city, and reimagine new spatial possibilities. Drawing on Gillian Rose's analysis on spatial imagination (1993) and on Doreen Massey's conceptualization of space (1991; 1994a; 1994b; 2005), which frames places as relationally produced within hierarchical power dynamics, the chapter examines how volunteers articulate and assign spatial meanings across patriarchal configurations embedded in both physical and digital spheres. The chapter also

²² “The street belongs to us as much as it belongs to you!” is a slogan often chanted during the *Aurat Marches*, asserting women's right to dissent and to occupy public space in a context where they are frequently excluded from or made to feel unsafe in it.

engages with volunteers' art practices to examine their experiences of living in and accessing the city. I argue that art constitutes a site of feminist critique through which volunteers articulate a different geographical knowledge (Rose 1993) of the city, centered on affective and emotional struggles, which is intimate and built on their lived experiences. Through their artworks, which take both digital and material forms, across exhibitions and social media pages, artists explore and contest gendered hierarchies and often-invisibilised forms of oppression, while generating alternative visions of the city through utopian explorations and dreamscapes. Both spatial practices and artworks produced by volunteers reveal an emotional and affective process of mapping which traces a city's cartographies built on an overlapping of emotions, such as fear, rage, despair, as well as courage, joy, and fun.

The chapter comprises the introduction followed by five paragraphs. The **second paragraph**, *Missed Mobilities: Navigating Fear and Spatial Segregation*, examines how both sexual violence (and its threat) and spatial segregation affects volunteers' spatial practices, particularly their access and presence in public spaces. By drawing on Datta's concept of "genderscape of hate" (2011) and feminist scholar's analysis of women's spatial mobilities and emotions (Ahmed 2004; Mehta 1999; Valentine 1989), I discuss the way fear emerges as central in structuring how women perceive space, producing mental maps that inscribe safety and risk in the city. Subsequently, after contextualizing the emergence of spatial segregation as a modern political tool of gender control, framed as *chādar and chārdīvārī*, I discuss Iqra's personal experience how, in negotiating mobility with her family, spatial segregation emerges as a mechanism that operates through gendered moral frameworks of respectability and *izzat* (honour). The **third paragraph** *Rhythms Interrupted* centers on women's trajectories in the city, which by being constantly disrupted and subjected to episodes of verbal and physical harassment, emerge as "intermittent". Drawing on works on gender theory and art, I investigate how masculine staring habits to which volunteers are subjected is turned into a visual critique of the male gaze (Mulvey 1975) within the works of Mahenoor Raphick and Mehak Tahir, two artists of the National College of Arts in Lahore. By employing visual subversions, their works challenge and disrupt the

voyeurism embedded in the gaze and open up alternative “ways of seeing” (Berger 1972), revealing how harassment functions by emotionally and materially affecting women’s psyche and bodies. **In paragraph four**, *Feminist Claims to the City*, I explore how volunteers articulate loitering as a central feminist claim to the city. Taking as a starting point Laiba and Aleen’s poster, I foreground gardens and parks as ambivalent places where the desire of leisure and self-exploration is met with experiences of discomfort and harassment. Building on South Asian feminists scholarship (Khatri 2019; Kirmani 2020; Phadke 2020, Renade 2007), I explore how loitering shapes volunteers’ desire for and access to urban spaces often perceived as “hostile” (Phadke 2012), allowing them to re-signify their presence and mobility. In this context, friendship (Phadke and Kanagasabai 2023) emerges as a transformative practice, reinscribing the city with affective cartographies and enabling new, collective ways of experiencing Lahore. Building on studies on Urban Theory, particularly contributions on South Asian urbanism (Akhtar 2022; Brenner 2000; Edensor and Jayne 2012, Kirmani 2021) in **the fifth and last paragraph**, *Street Utopias and Urban Possibilities in Emil’s Art*, I explore how contemporary processes of urban development in Lahore have produced “architecture of forgetting” (Rajani and Islam 2021) through militarized spaces, gated societies and state-led real estate projects, producing surveillance, alienation and fragmented urban enclaves. I discuss how these processes are contested within Emil’s isometrical artworks, where she articulates alternative landscapes and possibilities of urban living built on community, local architecture, and forms of belongings rooted in local practices.

The chapter addresses the following questions: how are volunteers’ ways of inhabiting Lahore and everyday spatial trajectories shaped by gendered forms of spatial control and moral regulation? In which ways do volunteer’s spatial practices contest how patriarchy is spatially constructed by re-signifying urban spaces with different spatial meanings? How do art practices articulated by *Aurat March* volunteer artists disrupt and subvert patriarchal masculine “ways of seeing” (Berger 1972) and discourse? How does their art constitute a site of geographical knowledge production and feminist place-making?

2.1.2 Place-making, Gender and Spatial Knowledge

The analysis presented in this chapter on volunteer's spatial practices draws on Doreen Massey's theoretical work on the relational production of place, gender and spatial identities (1991; 1994a; 1994b; 1995), alongside Gillian Rose's elaborations on geographical knowledge and the production of feminist spatial imagination (1993).

Massey defined **place** as “**particular moments of intersecting social relations**” (1994), understandings and experiences which are constructed stretching across different scapes and scales, from global to local, exceeding the locality itself. Being constituted through the intersection of social relations, places are inherently shifting and dynamic and, because these relations are embedded in power structures, identities of places are not neutral, but unfixed, contested and negotiated. Conceptualizing place as relationally produced in the context of patriarchal neoliberal social structures, **spatial practices** constitute an important site to understand how power functions and how it is spatialized across different scales. They shed light on how spatial relations shape identity of places, how gendered hierarchies are reinforced or contested, how spatial meanings are assigned or challenged. These processes are evident, for instance, in the ways gardens, streets or alleys are assigned with meanings, such as safe and unsafe, which shift depending on the presence of different publics moving through them. Similarly, episodes of sexual violence occurring at specific times in certain urban localities shape women's mobility decisions and structure their everyday temporal and spatial routines in the city. Collective loitering practices, particularly centered on friendship, also mediate access to space, resignifying places understood as inaccessible and dangerous. At the same time, places that once embodied intimate and local forms of belonging for women can lose this quality when capital-led urban projects reconfigure them, inscribing new spatial relations and meanings reflecting global lifestyles and unfamiliar forms of inhabiting. Gupta and Ferguson (1997) conceptualize **place-making** as the process through which spatial meanings are established, or, drawing on Massey, through which spaces are turned into places. As the authors have emphasized, place-making processes do not represent mere ideas, but are embodied

political practices that shape identities and enable forms of resistance to these. As the social relations that constitute places are situated within different power hierarchies (of different groups situated in unequal power geometries), **place-making always emerges as a contested process**. Gupta and Ferguson's interpretation is particularly significant for my research context, which places place-making within uneven gendered power hierarchies. Asking who holds the power to assign spatial meanings, who challenges it, and how, provides insights into how these meanings are established through moral discourses within households (for instance, when parents restrict or regulate women's access to public spaces), and how they are contested, as seen in *Aurat March's* taking on the streets despite bans, or in art interventions that question and disrupt gender hierarchies and the way violence is embedded in places. In this sense, **art practices constitute "place-making practices"**, through which volunteer artists assign and contest meanings to their different experiences and engage in urban knowledge production. Christiane Brosius (2016) has conceptualized artworks as "place-making strategies, as excavation tools and the production of (alternative) knowledge", capable of articulating and uncovering "other cultural maps" and "narratives of habitation" that offer readings of the city commonly marginalized or rendered invisible (157). The artworks I discuss take distance from hegemonic representations of space built on masculinist neutral gaze, instead function as sites where heterogeneous affective, experiential, embodied spatialities coexist and where a different "**spatial imagination**" (Rose 1993, 137) is articulated. This concept has been proposed by Rose in her seminal work, *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* (1993), in which she argued that women have been historically marginalized and excluded from the production of geographical knowledge. This discipline, she continues, has been structured by particular forms of masculinity (and in its visual modalities, a gaze), which are white, bourgeois and heterosexual, and have shaped how the discipline claims to know and represent space, place and landscape.

Gillian Rose argued that feminist discourse articulates a "**spatial imagination**" that explores a particular form of identity that challenges masculinist claims to exhaustiveness, by asserting the possibility of self-representation and a radically different sense of space. This sense of space expands beyond a narrow masculine

framework and implies different geographies which “are lived, experienced and felt” and which “articulate specific arguments about power and identity”, speaking of “power, resistance and the acknowledgement of difference” (Ibid., 140-141). Rose’s conceptualization of spatial imagination, as a means of articulating different identities, and forms of geographical knowledge, informs my exploration of art practices throughout the chapter.

Building on my earlier discussion of Massey, I now consider how her conceptualization of space provides a framework for understanding how the process of place and gender identity formation intersect. In her seminal work *Space, Place and Gender* (1994) she draws from De Laurentis’ conceptualization of identities as “**articulation**”, rejecting the traditional discourse reflecting a patriarchal understanding which frames identities through binary categories premised on rigid boundaries and exclusions. The idea of articulation rather points at a process of identity-formation that “recognizes differences and embraces complexity” :

“It is a move, in terms of political subjects and of place, which is anti-essentialist, which can recognize difference, and which yet can simultaneously emphasize the bases for potential solidarities. Moreover, if places are conceptualized in this way, and if their definition is amplified to take account of the construction of the subjects within them (...) then the identity of place is a double articulation (1994, 8)

This “double articulation” not only indicates a different understanding of the identities as relational, but also how articulations of spatial and personal identities are deeply entangled. When situated in the study of gendered spatial dynamics explored in my analysis, the process of spatial and gender identity formation must be approached as mutually constituted and relationally entangled, as the concept of “double articulation” suggests. As Massey discusses ahead in her work:

“There are other ways, too, in which space and place are important in the construction of gender relations and in struggles to change them. From the symbolic meaning of spaces/places and the clearly gendered messages which they transmit, to straightforward exclusion by violence, spaces and places are not only themselves gendered but, in their being so, they both reflect and affect the ways in which gender is constructed and understood.” (1994, 179).

In this sense, in the context of my study, the constraints produced by moral regulation on women's mobilities and access to public spaces are inseparable from the way their identities are shaped, in the same way in which women, through loitering practices in the city, also negotiate the ways they inhabit both their embodied selves, not only places. To conclude this theoretical introduction, I argue that Massey's conceptualization of places as relationally articulated and Rose's feminist formulation on geographical knowledge offer a significant perspective in understanding how **spatial categories** are constructed. Their perspectives encourage viewing spatial categories and meanings as challenging the binary understandings of spaces (such as private/public, masculine/feminine, safe/unsafe, regulated/unregulated), instead promoting a processual interpretation of categories as porous, contingent and temporal. A similar analysis was developed by Saraswati Raju, who explained the construction of spatial categories within the South Asian region. In *Gendered Geographies* (2011), she challenged the binary frameworks through which eurocentric works have defined south asian spatialities, arguing that distinctions such as outside and inside do not correspond to the notions of public and private, and therefore cannot be treated as fixed or self-evident categories. Contributions on **translocality** (Freitag and von Oppen 2010), have offered a similar critique, emphasizing a dynamic constitution of space and supporting categories that emerge not on binary distinctions (local/global; micro/macro; western/eastern), but are constructed on practices that blur scalar or normative distinctions. By situating this within my analysis, for instance, gendered regimes of visibility, and not structural characteristic of material spaces, emerge as central in regulating the status of domestic places (the house, the courtyard or even the rooftop), which shift and cease to be "private spaces" depending on whether a stranger man enters the premises. Rather than being treated as fixed binaries, spatial categories such as public and private can be conceptualized as fluid positions within a continuum, where meanings may co-exist, overlap or be reconfigured, and boundaries are continuously negotiated within gendered spatial relations. Therefore, I do not ask what is public or private, but rather when a space becomes public and when it becomes private, and under what circumstances? When does a space shift from being desirable to undesirable, or when can multiple contrasting meanings coexist simultaneously?

Before turning to the next paragraph, I should mention the rich literature on space and gender built by feminist geographers and social scientists, particularly in South Asia, who explored how gender power relations are implicated in the production of space and spatial hierarchies within everyday practices of urbanism. Among these, Saraswati Raju's analysis of the social construction of spatial categories (2011) and Aparajita De's studies on the "imagined geographies" to understand the narratives and cultural understanding of space in communities in Ahmedabad (2004). Equally significant are the feminist contributions on women's loitering practices, notably Phadke, Khan and Renade's research in Mumbai (2007; 2013; 2020) and Nida Kirmani in Karachi (2020) and, lastly, Anandita Datta's work on gendered violence and space in South Asia (2011). In the following paragraph I introduce the context in which my analysis is situated, by discussing the way art has been configured as central in feminist praxis in Lahore.

2.1.3 The National College of Arts and Feminist Art-Making

Similarly to Rose's portrayal and analysis of geographical knowledge, art too has long been dominated by masculine discourses and modes of representation. In her work *Art on my Mind* (1995), bell hooks critiqued "a politics of white supremacist capitalist patriarchal exclusion" (xii) that has historically structured women's engagement with art, calling for the need for "the production of art and the creation of a politics of the visual" to both empower artists and contribute to "the development of an *aesthetics of viewing*" (3). After situating art as a historically significant site for feminist theorization and mobilization in Lahore, this section turns to examine the contexts and transformations in which the artworks discussed in the chapter are situated, with particular attention to art practices around *Aurat March*.

Art, with particular reference to visual artworks, had an important role in exploring feminist sensibilities, and particularly in the way it became a central tool of political mobilization and resistance in the women's movement against Zia-UI-Haq's dictatorship. When Zia imposed a ban on several art forms (including performances, dances and the

depiction of human figures in fine arts, labelled as obscene) and allowing only more “islamic” forms like calligraphy, women adopted these very art forms as a means of resistance. Prys pointed at how despite the dictatorship, visual arts flourished as in opposition, together with other creative practices such poetry and theatre. During Zia’s regime, most women artists had been studying at the National College of Arts in Lahore, former Mayo School of Art, established in 1875 by the British, enacting a “discourse of visual literacy orientalism” (Tarar 2022, 63)²³. During the dictatorship of general Zia-UI-Haq (1977-1988), the institute constituted an important place for women’s creative explorations and reflection on themes related to women oppression: artists and performers such as Salima Hashmi, Lala Rukh and Huma Safdar became part of the women’s movement articulated under the umbrella organization of the Women’s Action Forum. Salima Hashmi and Farida Batool noted the “coincidental role played by women art educators” (2019, 78) in educating and influencing future generations of artists at NCA, emphasizing how many women activists had then served as teachers in art institutions. Significantly, these women were the ones who moved away from Eurocentric art canons, going towards more reflexive explorations centering on personal experiences, made of storytellings and multimedia works. However, as pointed out by Hashmi and Batool, this shift in art practices was initially invisible within the prevailing discourse on Pakistani art history. The institute remained a significant site for feminist knowledge production after the Zia era, engaging with the shifting political landscape of the country. In the mid 1990s, while serving as the principal of NCA, Hashmi (1995) wrote that “women artists in Pakistan are gradually linking their creativity and themes with the wider women’s movement in Pakistan. Feminist art here is at the threshold of integrating with and emerging from feminist political consciousness which needs to be built upon to (re)define and impact on art and creativity in Pakistan” (109). **Lala Rukh**, the artist behind Women’s Action Forum’s posters, was also a “much-loved teacher and mentor” at NCA, where she set up the Master’s Program in Visual Art in 2000,

²³ Tarar (2022) offers a rich analysis of the origins of the Mayo School of Art, closely linked to the earlier establishment of the Lahore Museum (or Ajeeb Ghar). The school was founded to advance technical education and promote design, manufacture, and industry in line with the British vision for commercial development of colonial Punjab. This reflected a broader colonial project that sought to transform the knowledge system rooted in *karkhanas* (artisanal workshops) into a “rational”, “literate”, and British-derived model of training based on visual literacy, standardised skills and institutional learning.

combining traditional and contemporary practices, challenging the college's purely Western method of teaching art (Khan and Rahman 2025, 10).

Some of the artists that I discuss in this chapter who contributed to *Aurat March's* artworks, or whose practices have been articulated in parallel to the rise of the feminist movement in the country, have also studied or trained at NCA. **Shehzil Malik** (introduced in paragraph two) has been one of the latest emerging digital illustrators in the country: her work has been exploring issues of gender, space and politics, and since 2018 she has contributed to many posters for *Aurat March* Lahore. Before the march too, her work had articulated her experiences of navigating the city, questioning women's access to public spaces, safety, private-public divide, and the male gaze through feminist cartoons and illustrations²⁴. Among these, it is worth mentioning her visual reinterpretations of Bengali writer Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's feminist utopian novel *Sultana's dream*, which is significant in that it highlights women's envisioning different forms of spatial, gendered, and political relations through art and across time²⁵. Her practice emerged in a moment when digital technologies were increasingly applied to art and when new digital media platforms, in particular Instagram, were increasingly used by artists. These spaces not only created new terrains for connection, but also, due to their visual prominence, fostered the development of a new aesthetic gradually replacing older platforms used by collectives such as Facebook or Tumblr.

The works I present in the chapter exist in more than one format. Digital artworks by artists such as Mehak Tahir and Mahenoor Raphick (in the third paragraph) are created using mixed media, combining digital technologies with material tools. These works, conceived for NCA gallery exhibition, have also been transposed on social media, where they have been circulating as online videos or photographs. In some instances, exhibitions themselves are conceived as virtual spaces curated by foundations and magazines, where artists submit their work around specific themes, as in the case of Emil's artworks (paragraph five). Conversely, digital illustrations are turned into their material form, for example the many artworks created each year for *Aurat March* which

²⁴ See @shehzilm, Account Page, *Instagram*, <https://www.instagram.com/shehzilm/>

²⁵ @shehzilm, *Sultana's Dream*, *Instagram*, January 23, 2022
https://www.instagram.com/p/CZE1ofgsxqA/?img_index=1

are then printed and carried in the demonstration, as seen in the poster illustrations of Shehzil Malik (paragraph two) or Laiba and Aleen (paragraph four). These movements across media and sites invite a reconsideration of how art, space and politics intersect. Drawing on a transcultural reading, Monica Juneja urges us to question existing analytical categories rather than simply producing new ones. Following this perspective, the chapter explores how feminism and artistic practices are entangled across technological and spatial domains crossing digital and material spatialities.

2.2 Missed Mobilities: Navigating Fear and Spatial Segregation

2.2.1 Learning to Move in Lahore

Fear of gendered violence shaped my mobility in Lahore, informing my spatial practices and my research's trajectory, gradually constructing what Leslie Kern has called a women's "mental map of safety and fear" (2021, 149). According to the author, the city can be understood as a living collage made by layers of emotions, words and images which overlap over various spatialities, built on "personal experiences of danger and harassment but also media, rumors, urban myths, and the good 'old common sense'" (148). My mental mapping was shaped through everyday conversations with students and *hostelites*, security guards and staff of Kinnaird College for Women (KCW) where I resided, who repeatedly warned me about the inherent unsafety of public places, particularly after *Mağrib* (sunset, the evening prayer). These shared narratives, alongside media reports of harassment, shaped the fear that structured my everyday mobility, initially built less by direct experience than by socially produced discourses of risk. Fear for me materialized as a sustained state of embodied vigilance, particularly when travelling alone in certain locations or in the late evening or night. It also meant renouncing to potentially meaningful situations, and then coping with a sense of missed opportunities in my limited time. Fear made me extremely aware of myself and my body as I travelled long distances in a cab: should I engage in conversation to normalize the ride or remain silent? Did I look confident enough to deter potential harm? When waiting for a ride, I often felt anxious whenever multiple drivers canceled, knowing that the later

it became, the fewer options would be available. One day I sarcastically told my friends that I had come to the conclusion that rickshaws, when available, were safer: in cases of danger, I could have jumped out, unlike being trapped in a locked car which would also go faster. They had similar thoughts.



Fig. 5 : Navigating Lahore, @shehzilm, Instagram. January 20, 2022.²⁶

During my third visit I moved to Model Town, a historic upper-middle class neighbourhood whose centrality facilitated my mobility and placed me closer to both older areas of the city and to the gated societies where most of the volunteers lived and where interviews took place²⁷. As my fieldwork progressed, my mobility was reshaped by growing familiarity with the city's spatialities, and by expanding my relational network. I developed strategies to navigate the city: calculating temporal and logistical contingencies, assessing the probability to find transport at specific times and locations, monitoring my phone battery to share my location and pay for the ride. I had learnt where to go and where not to go at what time of the day, always carrying a pepper spray gifted by a friend. Over time, I stopped wearing a *dupatta*, initially worn to deflect

²⁶ https://www.instagram.com/p/CY9HoUvMSzz/?img_index=1

²⁷ DHA, Cantt, and Askari, around 30-40 minutes distant. See Figure 1

attention, and developed strategies to negotiate my visibility: adjusting my gaze, avoiding lingering in one spot, and moving in ways that synchronized with the rhythms of those around me. Companionship, often of male friends, eased body vigilance and enabled access to spaces I would not walk alone, especially after sunset. My positionality as a woman and foreigner produced both privileges and constraints. At KCW, I enjoyed greater freedom than hostel residents; yet in areas such as Lahore Cantt, my foreign status would translate into restrictions at the checkpoints, sometimes resulting in being turned back for reasons of “national security” or for “my own safety”. Mobility thus emerged not simply as a matter of choice, but as a negotiated and embodied practice shaped by real and potential encounters, and the feelings they generated. These internalized maps of concerns also impacted the planning of interviews. Volunteers chose locations where they felt comfortable, typically homes or more often familiar cafes in upper-middle-class commercial areas. Interviews were occasionally interrupted by parental calls urging them home, and we routinely confirmed each other’s safe arrival at home afterward. My experience informed the need to explore spatial practices in my research. In the following paragraphs, I examine how gendered violence and spatial segregation operate as spatial, affective and moral regulatory mechanisms shaping women volunteers' access and their mental mapping of Lahore.

2. 2.2. Cartographies of Violence

Indian scholar Anindita Datta argued that in South Asian contexts of “classic patriarchy” (Kendiyoti 1988), where women’s oppression is reinforced by men and older women through family, marriage and control over honour, gendered violence is an integral factor in the production of spatial meanings, creating a reality in which violence is itself normalized (2011). Datta defined the set of performances, perceptions, and portrayals of gender enacted through everyday spatial practices as “**genderscapes of hate**” (2016, 179): a fluid and multilayered dimension in which women are constantly devalued, humiliated and subjected to different forms of violence ranging from discrimination to culturally sanctioned misogyny. “Rape culture” describes the systemic

nature of violence where gendered violence manifests in the forms of abductions, honour killings, forced marriages, domestic abuse and street harassment. The pervasiveness and normalization of this structural violence in the context of Pakistan is evident in the statistics published by organizations and institutions. Among these, the last annual report by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) on Punjab documented 15,376 (reported) cases of violence against women in just the first six months of 2025 alone, of which 1,651 were incidents of rape, 9,166 kidnappings, 89 honour killings, and 4,455 cases of domestic violence (HRCP 2026, 58). When Shehzil Malik, one of the main poster illustrators of *Aurat March* Lahore, shared the illustration on her personal Instagram page (Figure 6) she shared the exhaustion affecting women's psyche and vulnerability ("*Insaan Hoon*") due to the constant daily news of violence. Dua Mangi, a young woman from Karachi, had just been abducted, just to be found alive a few days later. In the year preceding my fieldwork in 2022, several high-profile cases of gendered violence occurred, capturing global attention, provoking widespread feelings of exhaustion, disillusionment and pervasive fear in many *Aurat March*'s volunteers I spoke with. Among these, the Lahore-Sialkot motorway rape case (Chughtai 2020)²⁸, the large-scale harassment at *Minār-e-Pākistān* on Independence Day (Gabol and Chaudhry 2021)²⁹ and the murder of Noor Muqaddam in Islamabad (Saifi 2021)³⁰. During that time *Aurat March* had made a post calling for a "much needed reminder" to remain resolute in their hope and uphold their sisterhood in order not "to not be overcome by fear, despondency and grief." (Figure 7).

²⁸ In September 2020, a woman was raped and robbed in front of her children on the Lahore-Sialkot motorway after her car broke down. The incident triggered a nationwide outrage and renewed calls for public safety, while highlighting the persistent issue of victim-blaming in society as Lahore Chief Police officer questioned the fact that she was travelling at night.

²⁹ On Pakistan Independence Day 2021, a young woman visiting the national monument of *Minār-e-Pākistān* in Lahore was assaulted, robbed and harassed by a violent crowd reportedly of more than 400 men. Viral videos of the assault circulated on social media, spreading severe protests and shock concerning women's safety in public spaces.

³⁰ Noor Muqaddam was a young woman, daughter of a former diplomat, who was tortured, sexually assaulted and assassinated by Zahir Jaffer in 2021 in Islamabad, after she reportedly rejected his marriage proposal. Since 2021, the *Aurat March* has played a significant role in amplifying the legal battle pursued by Noor's family and friends, while also calling for structural reforms to strengthen protections for women and to punish the perpetrators of gender-based violence.



Fig.6 “Breaking News”. Source: @shehzililm, Instagram, December 4, 2019³¹

Fig.7 Post on Episodes of Violence in 2021. Source: @auratmarch, Instagram, August 19, 2021.³²

Sara Ahmed’s analysis helps to situate the intersection of space and emotions, seen as performative and processual process (2004). Ahmed rejected the argument that they are only internal psychological states that we “own”, but rather performative “social and cultural practices” through which “we respond to objects, and others, and surfaces or boundaries are made” (10). Throughout the interviews I conducted with volunteers, fear of gendered violence emerged as one of the main constraints and obstacles affecting their possibility to travel and to inhabit the city. This same emotion has long been addressed by feminist geographers as a central lens for understanding women’s mobilities and the ways in which spaces are structured by the presence of men (Mehta 1999; Pain and Smith 2008; Valentine 1989). Gill Valentine (1989) challenged the notion that women’s fear is irrational, drawing attention to spaces (and therefore, from a feminist perspective, the relations that articulate them), in the production of embodied, gendered subjects. From this perspective, the “living map” described by Keir (2021) is constituted by places in which women displace their fear into, such as parks, streets, darkened alleyways, marketplaces or deserted gated communities. Pain and Smith (2008) conceptualize fear as having a moral and material geography, arguing that it is “a product of the power relations that shape moral codes” (9) through which fear

³¹ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CSwsv4JiunD/>

³² <https://www.instagram.com/p/B5onzS-ANo7/>

materializes unevenly across places, relationships and bodies (intersecting with gendered, classed, and ethnic identities). They further suggest that these power relations can be understood through the lens of “moral (material) panic” (11) in which fear becomes detached from actual material risk while simultaneously is ingrained in material practices that are shaped by it. Some serious incidents of violence which had previously occurred shaped how volunteers decided to access the city and contributed to labeling some places as dangerous. Following the massive harassment of a woman at *Minār-e-Pākistān* on Independence Day 2021, Iqra consciously “never stepped foot in that park” (Iqra, July 10, 2023). Mahira would slow her pace in a park so that “everybody goes ahead” and “*koī pichē na ho*”(no one follows me), or take protecting measures while driving, like locking doors or using blinds so that, unless someone was ahead of her and looked in the back view-mirror, “they cannot know that there is a woman sitting inside the car” (Mahira, September 13, 2023). Socially accepted and deeply rooted rape myths, such as the assumption that women provoke rape through their behaviour or clothing, or that they result from uncontrollable male desire (Omer 2021), also structure women’s mental maps. Questions such as why a woman was crossing a particular neighbourhood, walking alone at night, or taking a specific route are anticipated and internalized by women, influencing how they structure their trajectories in everyday spaces as much as, if not more than, actual threats.

Alongside gendered violence, political instability also has contributed to the production of fear and a widespread sense of vulnerability, particularly in the years when volunteers were attending school, until a year before my visit to Lahore. Although it equally endangers all citizens across gender, racial and class, extremism impacted women who saw their mobilities being further restricted. Violence reconfigured places as dangerous, such as the famous *dargāh Dātā Darbār*, where bombs were detonated in 2010 and 2019 (Hashim 2019), and as it happened in Gaddafi Stadium in 2015. *Gulshan-e-Iqbāl* park (Gowen and Hussain 2016), located in an upper-middle class area, was targeted in 2016 when a suicide bomber killed 72 women and children. At that time, artist Shehzil Malik created a collective mural at the site, using art as a means to confront the fear

that violence had left and to foster community, collective resilience and strength³³. Jia, who was 23 at the time of my research, had grown up in *'Allāmah Iqbāl Town*, an area that in 2009, when she was a child, was targeted by a series of deadly bomb blasts. Unlike other volunteers, she described herself as relatively “immune” to fear of violence: “I am *numb* to it, sometimes you are pushed to a certain degree that I feel it is just another day in Pakistan! As you know I travel alone, harassment happens every single day almost. If it does not happen I would say it is the best day!” (Jia, July 19, 2023). Political instability and prolonged exposure to violence such as in her case lead to numbness and a different perception of risk. Saba Gul Khattak (1995) argued that war and militarisation in particular have impacted women’s lives, affecting their environments, roles and mobilities, through material interventions such as checkpoints, but mostly by disrupting access to education, economic activities, as well as their participation outside home, in political organizing too. Mob violence equally inscribed the city with gendered fear: for instance, protests and clashes with police and *Tehrik-e-Insāf* (PTI) party supporters in February 2023 affected the college where I stayed, as tear gas reached the campus and the following day classes were suspended. Around one year later, communal violence (Krause et al., 2025)³⁴ erupted in *Ichhrā Bāzār* a few kilometers from my home, when a woman wearing a dress with arabic words (*Halwa*) was accused of blasphemy, and nearly lynched (Chaudhry 2024). The following week, at the *Aurat March*, volunteers made sure not to wear clothes with misunderstandable writings on them, and I avoided visiting that *bāzār* for a while³⁵. The perception of living in a violent society impacts volunteers, while at the same time constitute a part of their possibilities and obstacles in navigating the city, as explored in the next section.

³³ @shehlizilm, “Inteha Pasandi Ab Nahi”- “Extremism No More”, *Instagram*, May 9, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/B_9dyzpAkyR/?img_index=1

³⁴ According to Krause et al. (2025), the terms refer to acts of physical violence perpetrated by civilians who mobilize along a shared identity (who believe that they are part of the same ethnicity, religious communities or nationality) against victims chosen according to a group membership.

³⁵ In particular, volunteers raised concerns over WAF’s yellow scarf, which carries writings on it. The episode of violence was such that even *Wearing Manto*, a Pakistani brand creating clothes featuring urdu calligraphy, released a statement on social media addressing women and inviting them to prioritize their safety. @wearingmanto, *Instagram*, February 26, 2024. https://www.instagram.com/p/C30Fgyponri/?img_index=1

2.2.3 Chādar aur Chārdīwārī: from Pardah to Moral Regulation



Fig. 8. Private/ public - Inside/ outside". Source: @shehzililm," *Instagram*, September 21, 2022 ³⁶

In Shehzil Malik's "**Private/ public - Inside/ outside**" (Figure 8) a woman lies within the red sandstone *baradari* (pavilion) of *Shālimār* Garden. However the scenery, apparently evoking the tranquillity of the *Mughal* garden, appears to suggest a subtle scene of captivity: the architectural pillars around her seem like prison bars, her attire that of a prisoner, and her posture reinforces the impression of a state of boredom and waiting.

Yet this captivity also seems imaginary rather than strictly material. The boundaries confining her do not reflect solid walls but rather imaginary constructions, where spatial segregation emerges as accompanying women as a persisting and internalized state of mind. Her pensive gaze suggests a longing to fully inhabit the very space she appears to occupy, *Shālimār* Garden, a place often associated by *lahoris* with leisure, sunday pic-nics and lazy afternoons with family and friends. In the second image, the same woman has been pasted onto a garden wall in Lahore, and her posture suggests now the possibility of relaxing in a garden, under the shade of a tree. Shehzil Malik's artwork highlights the material, imaginative and affective dimensions of spatial segregation: these boundaries are not merely architectural but socially produced and reinforced within society and family structures built on morality, then internalized by women.

³⁶ https://www.instagram.com/p/Cixv5X4LVIY/?img_index=2

Among several volunteers I spoke with, similar patterns emerged, in which their mobilities and access to public spaces were often subjected to scrutiny by their families. These dynamics entailing spatial and moral regulation have to be situated within a system that has been historically and politically articulated, in which women's presence and mobility across public spaces has been regulated and restricted. As Bina Shah observed (2019) although the "*pardah system*", understood as the seclusion of women from public visibility, had long existed across various South Asian contexts, it acquired a radically different meaning (or rather was replaced) under Zia-Ul-Haq. From the end of the 1970s throughout the 1980s a Saudi-inspired religiosity was articulated into a modern project of political islamization of Pakistani society through a rigid, state-sanctioned model aiming at reducing the women's status and fostering their segregation. Under the unofficial state doctrine of *Chādar aur Chārdīwārī* (the veil and the four walls) women were prohibited to participate in spectator sports, required to wear *chadors* and an "Islamic attire" in government offices, on television and in public schools, and in some cases were excluded from recruitment in the public sector. At the request of political party *Jamā'at-e-Islāmī*'s demands, Zia's regime also attempted to reduce co-education by proposing women-only higher education institutions (Mumtaz and Shaheed 1987; Khan 2018). Between late 1970s and early 1980s, religious scholars circulated sermons and public campaigns emphasizing seclusion of women as necessary to preserving both female honour and the moral integrity of the nation. Despite being contested by many individuals, these measures provoked and legitimized new forms of social control: men increasingly felt entitled to police their women neighbours as well as strangers in public spaces, commenting on their clothes and behaviour. Activists from the Women's Action Forum reported, and personally experienced, an increase of cases of harassment among women across class (Khan 2018). As Shahnaz Rouse (2004) has poignantly argued, during Zia's rule (and after) women's status, which had already been shaped by gender separation, was further reinforced through a greater intervention from the State into both their the private and public sphere. As she noted, "boundary protection and definition - sexual, geographical, political, social, cultural and moral - became more pronounced" as a new discourse emerged that aligned the "guardians of the state - military - and guardians of public and

private morality”, including religious authorities and private vigilantism, to assure harassment and intimidation (102). Today, the legacy of the *Chādar aur Chārdīwārī* persists as an internalized, politicized belief system, reified through cultural practices and social attitudes, which, in varying degrees and forms, situates women's appropriate roles within the domestic sphere, associating them with everyday care and reproductive labour. What spatial segregation entails, beyond physical restriction, was articulated by (late) WAF's activist and educationist Rubina Saigol (1995), who argued that “the four walls are erected not only to shield them [women] from the gaze of the immoral and seductive public sphere, but also to break the ties of sound, laughter and talking between women. Young girls are often told not to laugh too loud or talk too much because it is inappropriate for women to do so and those who do are considered women of “bad character” (145 -146).

2. 2.4 Shame and the Politics of Respectability

For Iqra, as well as for many other volunteers I talked to, mobility and access to public places represent a site of contestation and of moral regulation. Despite having a good relationship with her mother, to whom she was deeply affectionate, Iqra constantly had to struggle to negotiate her agency and control of her personal time, a fight pointing out at the gendered expectations on women's evening mobility. It was a fight that, as she said, “never ended, a fight that she always wins!”.

“I came home at 10.30 or 11 and my mother was really really angry and she was shaming me like you got this kind of hairstyle and you are staying out that late? Do you want to be one of.... you are acting like those bad women? I think the most disturbing way of saying it would be “gandi aurat” like... (she pauses). Gandi aurat, when they call you something dirty, shameful they usually stick to street words, that would make you feel disgusting make you feel like filth (...) Ghattiya, gandi, awara... Awara is a word that they use that means somebody who is always out and around. Awara aurat, awara larki, ‘tum awara ho’, ‘tum aisi... you are the kind of person who is aimlessly out and about...’. If you translate it in english it doesn't sound like a bad word but it is a very bad word, awara means somebody who probably doesn't have anything to do. Someone who is just wasting time, someone who aimlessly goes around here and there...” (Iqra, July 10, 2023)

Iqra, who was in her early twenties at the time of the interview, had been involved with *Aurat March* in Lahore almost since its inception, gradually becoming an active volunteer engaged in campus-based outreach. She told me how her activism not only

deepened her awareness of gender and social justice issues, but also reshaped the way she understood her work in legal practice, where she often encountered cases she found ethically troubling. In particular, her work as a lawyer frequently placed her in distressing situations in which she was expected to uphold unjust practices by defending individuals accused of gender-based violence. Her professional life was also time-consuming, occupying most of her day, as earlier described, and leaving limited personal space or time to cultivate friendship and engage in leisure activities. The commonly heard warning “*aurat kī āwāz ghar kī chār dīwārī sē bāhir nahī jānī chāhiyē*”³⁷ points at how spatial restrictions are deployed to police women’s social interactions and connections, such as meeting friends, as Iqra says, especially evening or night activities:

“There is a bad moral connotation to it as awara person, is a person with that moral character (...) Why would you meet somebody at night? What are you gonna do when you meet them? Why couldn’t you meet them during the day? When there were perfectly good day time hours, what were you doing? Mother, I get out of work at 8 pm. When am I going to meet anyone? It doesn’t matter, all of these are excuses! (she laughs nervously) The idea ki tumhārā billā khatam nahī ho jātā ek ghañṭe mẽ? What more do you have to talk about? After one hour what is there to talk about? Show, show up! Come back home! There is nothing else you need to say after one hour.” (Iqra, July 10, 2023)

South Asian feminist scholars have argued that what legitimizes or delegitimizes women’s access to, and presence in, public spaces is closely tied to the **purpose** they are perceived to have and perform. As Shilpa Ranade (2007) observes: “Women can access public space legitimately only when they can manufacture a sense of purpose for being there. Flanerie as an act of engaging with urban public space is not available to women.” (1521). Similarly, Shilpa Ranade, in her study of women’s mobilities in Mumbai (2007), noted that that “entrance and acceptance in the public space is often conditional upon the appearing to have a specific task or activity to accomplish which then translates itself into a purposeful demeanour” (56). Manufacturing a “sense of purpose” (Ranade), or a “purposeful demeanour” (Phadke), functions as a mechanism through which women gain conditional access to public space and have their morality defined by different segments of society. Within this framework, public behaviour that

³⁷ “A woman’s voice should not go beyond the four walls of the home”

does not conform to socially assigned roles for women (whether productive or reproductive, depending on context), including activities such as loitering, sitting idly, waiting in public spaces are viewed as inappropriate or suspicious. As in the case of Iqra, her mother's investigation over her moral character (“*Why would you meet somebody at night? Why couldn't you meet them during the day?*”) becomes a site where patriarchal hierarchies, upheld by her mother, are reproduced *and* maintained. The centrality of the **purpose** on which women's mobilities are premised, is closely tied to the notion of **respectability**, which, by defying what women should or should not do in public, entails a distinction between who is good and who is a “*burī aurāt*”. As Iqra articulated:

*“I swear, it is hard to resist it, even if you have all the philosophy down in your head, you know all the feminism now, you know exactly why what they say is wrong, but the feeling of **shame** that a single word can create in your head... I don't know how people resist. (...) I don't know how it works. The system that they created ends up recreating in your own head like ‘Oh yeah I shouldn't have been out. I knew all of this. I know that is not good or I know that this is the kinds of men that are around me, things are supposed to happen.’ I had all this kind of information, so maybe it is right after all that I stay home after 9. Maybe it is right after all that I don't do absolutely nothing that my parents don't want me to do, because if I do it so much crap waits for me. It is just realistic, it starts to make sense that okay, I gotta be careful now and the moment you are outside the line and something bad happens to you, you remember that you were told that bad things happened, and who would they happen to? They happen to **bad women**.’ So it is a vicious cycle, it keeps you in line. (...) They know how to make sure you don't stray from your place, you get married on time, and you have children, and you stay with that one man... even if he cheats all his life, whatever! Even if you know what the right thing to do is.” (Iqra, July 10, 2023)*

As Phadke has pointed out (2007), respectability for women in the public spaces has an ambiguous status, which she paraphrases as an “unspoken and very contextual mixtures of space-time-occasion- specific dress codes, averted gazes, purposeful strides and an acute sensitivity bordering paranoia with regard to appropriate spaces and time zones.” (55). Respectability emerges here as a performance by which a woman is expected to safeguard her **izzat** (honour), and, by extension, that of the family, in the public eye, given that honour is tied to control over her sexuality. The way in which *izzat* has been central in the perpetuation of capitalist patriarchy, and in particular spatial segregation has been discussed in multiple works. Hamid (2023) argued that framing women as the bearers of family honour has constrained not only

their mobility, but their access to education and work, confining them to a private/feminine space and situating them in a status of subordination and dependence. To exercise control over women's honour, on which respectability is shaped, society mobilises an emotional and affective discourse centered on shame. The feeling of **shame**, which Iqra describes as capable of crippling a woman “with a single word” (Iqra, July 10, 2023) is functional to regulate women's mobilities and dismiss the threat of losing the honour.

2.2.5 The Moral Policing on Aurat March

Women taking the streets on the 8th of March have been subjected to the same patriarchal schemes of control, manifested through verbal policing and moral reproach of their public visibility. This moral discourse on how marchers should occupy public space, or whether such presence is legitimate at all, is being reproduced throughout the year across multiple contexts (legal, media and political), in the attempt to ban, obstruct or prevent women from marching.

As argued by Datta (2016), media and society play a huge role in reproducing narratives that curb women's spatial agency: “this devaluation and circumcision of agency in media is matched by the moral policing of extralegal cultural organizations and community leaders in the name of preserving traditional values” (180). The defamation campaigns that targeted *Aurat March* volunteers by political, religious scholars and television personalities were not related to the political manifesto, whose demands were repeatedly ignored in the public discourse, but questioned their right to appear in the streets on the base of their character, framing them as *randī*, *behayā*, *beghairat* (prostitute, immodest, shameless). Society attacked women's public visibility, criticizing their performances and their attires which were deemed inappropriate or “unislamic”. This moral condemnation entails the assumed binary spatial division prescribing where women should perform, appear, and how. While dancing and singing within domestic or private settings is considered acceptable and “part of the tradition”, women who perform in public spaces are vulgar, described with the epithet of “*naachne*

gane waali aurat" (a cheap performer), associated with public entertainment or shows. In response, women affiliated with *Jamā'at-e-Islāmī* Lahore, the principal opposition to the event, launched *Hayā March* (Modesty March), taking to the streets under slogans such as "*Merā Jism Allāh kī Marzī*" ("My body, God's will") which directly countered *Aurat March* slogan "*Merā Jism Meri Marzī*" (My body, My choice). Understood in this framework, *Hayā March* can be read as a performance asserting an alternative construction of a modern, Muslim womanhood as the only legitimate form to be recognized in public space³⁸. When discussing the counter-event with volunteers, one of them jokingly remarked that at the very least, *Aurat March* had forced them to come out of their homes. Many young men too, across political and religious affiliations, criticized the marchers dismissing the event as futile and claiming that a single day in a year achieved nothing. This illustrated how men feel entitled not only to regulate how women should occupy public space, but how they should occupy it on the basis of the work they do and the things that they claim. Finally, the city council of Lahore too has been another site where the women's moral conduct has been implicitly questioned. Each year, the Deputy Commissioner (DC) has been denying permission for the march, instead directing women to indoor places deemed more appropriate for their celebrations. The exhausting political environment in which *Aurat March* has articulated shaped the way participants elaborated how to navigate public scrutiny and to manufacture legitimate reasons and valid purposes to present to different publics. After enduring threats, accusations, online harassments, mobs attacks and delegitimization campaigns, successfully completing the march has gradually become a central reasoning and purpose for many volunteers I talked to. Being able to occupy the streets, as one of the volunteers told me, and compel men to witness women present in public spaces in their own terms, happy in their bodies, dancing and enjoying themselves has emerged as an equally vital purpose alongside their political demands. As Nayaab, another long-time volunteer organizer, told me:

³⁸ Scholar Amina Jamal (2005) argues that the secular women movement in Pakistan is more productively understood not as a confrontation between Islam and modernity, but as a contestation between competing projects of modernity, social development and nationhood. Within this framework, both secular feminists and religious women, such as those belonging to *Jamā'at-e-Islāmī*, emerge as actors seeking to shape the nation through distinct cultural and political projects.

“Why do you guys march? What’s the purpose? What do you achieve? And pehle I used to give very logical responses trying to give good arguments that this is why we march... But now I just get frustrated and I say ‘yeah we march to have fun what’s wrong with that? Why do we need a reason? It is not like that Imran Khan has a reason to do the things he does in public, so why do we need tangible outcomes or very very good reasoning to march, why can’t we march just because we want to? Yeah we want to sing and dance on the road for one day, and that should be fine!” (Nayaab, June 27, 2023)

For Iqra, volunteering in charge of participants’ safety at the march, where women are inevitably being labelled as a “*burī auratēn*”, became a transformative experience that shaped the ways she occupies public spaces while confronting distressful situations and the threat of male harassment:

“Even if someone is staring at me, I am alone, I know I can’t protect myself at night. I’ll just look down or I will walk faster, just be out of there as soon as possible. You can’t do it when you are a volunteer, you are there for a reason, you have to put your own uncomfortableness your discomfort aside, and you have to face it. So, it was alarms bells were ringing in my head, that I have to get out of here, but I could not, and I chose no to.” (Iqra, July 10, 2023)

Among the various placards’ slogans labeled controversial (Malik et al., 2025), “*Meīn Awārā. Meīn Badchālān*” (I loiter, I am characterless) boldly disrupted the normative construction of respectability discussed in these pages, by challenging the binary framework which categorises women as virgins or sluts, *acchī* or *burī*, according to the way they occupy public spaces. By proudly claiming these stigmatized identities, women enact a refusal to stand within patriarchal binary framework and moral codes, asserting their agency to define public visibility in their own terms, using feminist politics to expand notions of legitimacy, respectability and honour.

2. 3. Rhythms Interrupted: Navigating Public Spaces

2. 3.1 Weaning Through the Pyāsā Mard

In the weeks preceding *Aurat March 2023*, Husna, a student of the National College of Arts (NCA) and volunteer with whom I had grown close, proposed to visit the Lahore Museum together and take some pictures in the nearby garden (Figure 3). For the

occasion we decided to wear sarees, a garment which is increasingly worn by upper middle class women, particularly in events such as graduations, parties, weddings. As we traversed *Anārkalī* street food and *bāzār*, a vibrant commercial area situated at the intersection of historical and colonial marketplaces, our bodies were closely scrutinized³⁹. An old woman came up to me and covered a small patch of skin on my back and whispered in my ear as private admonition - even though we were already at the center of the public attention - that our clothes were inappropriate in a Muslim country, pointing out that we were not in India. What about Hindus, Christians, Husna asked. What if someone is not muslim, I asked myself. Probably *Anārkalī*, with its dense networks of communal social surveillance, was not the appropriate place to raise these questions. It was also likely that Zia Ul Haq's campaign to islamize the dress of (only) the female population, carried out fifty years earlier, by identifying the saree as "unislamic" (Mumtaz and Shaheed 1987), was still engrained in many people. Paraphrasing Akhtar's words (2022), "when it comes to the clothing of Pakistani women, perhaps the personal was never divorced from the political", referring to when singer Iqbal Bano made a public appearance in saree after it had been banned by the military dictator. Intersecting forms of gendered and communal surveillance explicit through the staring gazes and comments produced in us a constant need to self-monitor our bodies and movements. Even as we tried to appear relaxed and make small talks to distract ourselves from the onlookers, the discomfort remained palpable. The unprecedented attention we received that morning was, in a somewhat milder form, not uncommon whenever we walked those and other streets wearing *shalwār kamīz*, with our without our *dupattas*. After a few days, Husna published on social media a short reel capturing some of the gazes directed at us. Titled *Pyāsā Kawwā / Pyāsā Mard* (thirsty crow, thirsty man), the video pointed at the predatory gazes women are subjected to, accompanied by a caption:

"Walking in the old streets of Lahore wearing a sarhi is a thing. Forgetting the sheer patriarchal surveillance we were facing all time to enjoy the womanhood today. and realizing that it was

³⁹ Anarkali Street Food and Bazaar are situated near the Walled City of Lahore, and form a lively commercial and shopping hub. Nearby, many colonial-era buildings can be found, including offices, cafes and shops, as well as educational institutions such as the National College of Arts (former Mayo School of Arts) and the Government College (GCU), and the historical Lahore Museum founded in 1965.

*never about the piece of cloth women would wear, it's just the rooted feminicide in men's mentality."*⁴⁰

Earlier, I discussed how women's access to public space is constrained by regimes of control and moral policing that enforce spatial segregation. Women's access to public spaces is obstructed by the idea of *Chādar aur Chārdīwārī*, intersecting the threat of sexual violence they face. In this following section, I turn to explore what happens when women nonetheless navigate urban space. What forms of disruptions, harassment and violence are they subjected to? Suvorova's work (2011) showed how Lahore as a distinctive modern cultural and geographic space emerged through the writings of European travellers and romantic authors, whose representations reproduced an orientalist gaze inscribed in unequal power hierarchies. The urban knowledge emerging from the writings is produced by an unbothered male *flâneur*, whose perspective is shaped by an unrestricted experience of the city. Unlike these partial and insufficient narratives, I argue that women's trajectories are **fragmented, shaped by uncertain directions, disrupted rhythms, and continuous adjustments**, as their bodies are subjected to male surveillance and street harassment. Whether the female *flâneur*, the *flâneuse*, could exist, has been explored by Lauren Elkin (2017), who argued that women, simultaneously hyper-visible and invisible in the streets, navigate the city within gendered limitations, risks, and negotiations. Could a *lahori flâneuse*, actually exist as an unbothered observer, strolling carefree through streets, absorbing in the rhythms, sights and smells, and producing urban knowledge through leisurely observation?

When examining spatial practices, the **staring** to which women are subjected emerge as one of the most common cultural forms of male violence and control across classes and social backgrounds. I argue that this affects women in their experience of outside space, producing **"intermittent" mobilities** in which they are constantly made aware of their bodies (perceived as violated), their boundaries, and their relationship to them. I contend that these disruptions should be understood as instances in which gendered power hierarchies are reproduced and re-established with particular intensity and

⁴⁰ @wakeupfafa, "Pyasa kawwa / pyasa mard", Instagram, February 17, 2023.
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CowchxIDxBD/>

violence, consolidating men's authority over women's bodies and their presence in the public sphere. These hierarchies position men and women in unequal relations of domination and subjugation, yet within this dynamic there remains space for contestation, resistance and refusal. In the following section I examine how staring is experienced, narrated and contested in volunteers' accounts, and particularly in their artistic explorations articulating a critique of the **male gaze**, a concept elaborated by Laura Mulvey (1975). I problematize how the masculinist/male gaze is narrated and contested in the production of gendered spatial relations, and I situate it within a broader feminist history of visual art and body politics. Artistic explorations engage with the workings of the gaze while also functioning as spaces of critique, subversion through creative narratives and visual strategies. Significantly, the artworks discussed here were produced by young women volunteers who studied at the National College of Arts (NCA), located near *Anārkalī*, a dense spatiality mostly composed of lower and lower-middle class businessmen and shopkeepers, mostly Pashtuns and local Punjabis, working in shops and stalls. This area is also often crossed by a wide range of people, including students from other nearby well-known institutions, some of which established by the British (such as Government College University and the University of Punjab)⁴¹, as well as families, and local and foreign tourists. This social proximity transforms *Anārkalī* into a key site of encounters, where art students move through, observe, and draw inspiration for their artistic works (Figure 3).

2.3.2 From Staring to the Male Gaze

The masculine stare has been explored by Mehak Tahir, who began to work on her thesis at NCA during the time *Aurat March* was mobilizing in Lahore, in 2018, at the age of twenty-three, amidst the nascent feminist discourse in connection to #MeToo campaign and the consequent backlash that swept through Pakistani media and

⁴¹ The public character of these universities significantly shapes the social milieu of *Anārkalī*. Unlike private institutions, public universities reserve quotas based on province, district and "underdeveloped" regions to ensure nationwide representation (alongside offering lower fees). As a result, students from less privileged areas such as Balochistan, Gilgit Baltistan, or Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, but also locals, have comparatively greater access (despite intense competition) than they do in private universities, where financial barriers are generally more restrictive.

political landscape. I met Mehak through her work with Digital Rights Foundation (DRF), a research-based advocacy organisation focusing on human rights and digital governance, and had illustrated some issues of DRF's 50-50 digital magazine.

Her work “***Mast Nazron Se Allah Bacchaye. God save us from intoxicated glances***” (2018) (Figure 9) was displayed at NCA Thesis Display in 2018 as a series of large size canvases, then digitalized as published in her social media page. In these, she engages with critiques on European landscape painting tradition that centers women's nudes, while also exploring how masculine gaze sexualizes women's bodies. Her works enacts **multiple forms of subversions**, contesting both eurocentric landscape tradition, which objectified women's bodies for voyeuristic pleasure, and the ways in which Pakistani men's sexualizing gazes operate across urban spaces and constraining women's mobilities.



Fig. 9 , Mehak Tahir “Mast Nazron Se Allah Bacchaye. God save us from intoxicated glances”, Source: @mehaksart *Instagram*, November 29, 2018 ⁴²

In the series, women drawn from renaissance paintings are resituated at local contexts: eating in a *dhābā*, resting on a *chārpōī*, or, as in the painting reproduced here, lying

⁴² <https://www.instagram.com/p/BqwjafWnUz0/>

down at *Shālimār Garden*. Her work articulates Berger's analysis (1972) who argued that images are interpreted through the "way of seeing" they invite (9), shifting focus from the image itself to the relation between the spectator and what is depicted. He illustrated his analysis by presenting the example of the female nude in western art, in which women, depicted as unclothed, passive, alluring, are a "sight" to be assessed by the real protagonist, the (implicitly male) spectator for whom the woman's nudity is staged. Gillian Rose, building on art historian Nochlin's insight that female nudes are always framed by masculine desires (1993):

"The sensual topography of land and skin is mapped by a gaze which is eroticized as masculine and heterosexual. This masculine gaze sees a feminine body as something to own, and something to give pleasure. The same sense of visual power as well as pleasure is at work as the eye traverses both field and flesh: the masculine gaze is of knowledge and desire." (1993, 97)

In Mahek's work, the external male observer, which in western tradition corresponds to the viewer or spectator of the painting, is placed in the painting itself, and the gaze of pleasure is exposed and made visible. The lasers incorporated into the paintings work as intermittent rays of flash light, making more evident the sheer, piercing gaze which violates the body's boundaries and disrupts the activities in which women are engaged. Her work further emphasizes that women, whose bodies have been depicted in loose *salwār kamīz*, face harassment regardless of their appearance, thus rejecting the dominant narrative that women's attire defines boundaries or justify men's misconduct, a narrative which got reinforced through the targeting of the marchers in the years (Tariq 2021). Although her work was not directly formulated for the movement, it was informed by the issues it raised and reflected her political-personal experience. As she shared with me, her series was met with derision from NCA male professors, who "would start laughing in the room while doing the critique (...) saying such weird things about women" (Mehak, July 19, 2023). Similarly, some men visiting the exhibition addressed her with sarcasm, as she recounted: "Everybody would come 'Ooh, so you are that agenda girl with *Merā Jism Merī Marzī!*' People would come and would be like 'Oh let's stay away from her because she is gonna say everything against men!'" (Mehak, July 19, 2023). Landscape representation itself has been a recurrent narrative in western tradition reproducing a "visual ideology" (Rose, 1993, 87) expressing particular power

hierarchies over the land, in the form of masculine ownership. As Cosgrove argues, this conveyed not only a sense of “material control over the land”, but also the “social and visual position of the landowner” (Ibid., 90). Another subversion is presented by the title: the famous line rendered popular by *qawālī* artist Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan overthrows the narrative that depicts the beloved, frequently a woman, as a source of intoxication, which obstacles the relationship between the man and God. In that context, a woman's *mast nazar* (intoxicating gaze) represents both the intoxication of love and the pain and distress from which men cannot subtract themselves. In her work, the *mast nazar* is reclaimed from this male-centered gaze and re-inscribed within a different relationship, that between victims and perpetrators.

Salima Hashmi argues that the “malestream” (1995, 106), the masculine way of seeing ingrained in western painting traditions, has systematically marginalized women, denying them the space for self-narration to explore the “contradictions produced by how men see women's bodies” (108). Similarly, according to art historians Parker and Pollock (1981), women's exclusion from painting themselves not only restricted their careers, but also reflected how capitalist patriarchy denied them “both the tools and the power to give meanings of their own to themselves and their culture” (115). In her article, Kristin Plys (2023) points at how the female nude became a central political symbol in feminist visual culture during Zia's regime, when women artists challenged the censorship imposed on arts and the violence and persecution of women's bodies in general. As the author describes, “Pakistani feminist artists depicted a collective desire to make their bodies socially visible at a time when the postcolonial state threatened to render them invisible” (642). In a similar context, Tahir's work engages with women's bodies not as objects of the viewer's sexual desire, but as sites of critique and a desire to be seen differently. It is therefore crucial to situate her practice within this continuity of practices of subversions of hegemonic “ways of seeing” and representation, a tradition in which NCA has played an important role.

2. 3.3: Dematerializing Bodies, Othering the Self

What happens to the body when it is subjected to sustained staring? Laiba, one of the two co-authors of the *Aurat March* poster in 2023, recounted a moment vividly imprinted in her mind as she walked home after attending the march a few years earlier. At the end of the event, as volunteers quickly dismantled the installations and collected the posters, the city slowly reverted to its usual familiar rhythms: the traffic resumed, people moved through the streets earlier surveilled and militarized (a substantial amount of police was deployed for the marchers' security), as volunteers were making sure that other women could safely go home. The fleeting world created by the *March*, marked by celebration, collective presence, courage, music, colours, slogans, shared joy and rage, quickly dissolved. In this liminal time, the road resumed their atmosphere perceived as threatening, unsafe and hostile, leaving women and queer individuals more vulnerable to harassment.

"I remember walking with my friend and there was this guy on a motorbike that kept like... Whistling at me. You know like a catcall and then... He would go and come back. Like I am walking along the road and he is also coming like this on the motorbike. And I am not taking it seriously. He just like talking shits about Aurat March. That he hates the march you go to hell you are so sexy... And I am just like sitting in the car with my friend now and I just like.. (she pauses) What was he looking at? Because to me.. I was just like... Out of my body! Like you could not see... What I look like... Like you could not even see my body because I was wearing really loosely fit clothes... And I was like... What was he looking at? Because... I was not... In my body, you know? It was a very crazy experience... They will find any way to intimidate you and the fact that I used to cope with this sort of harassment in the street... I had othered myself from my body as well... It was just crazy". (Laiba, February 23, 2023)

The unwanted staring elicited an intense self-awareness of her corporeality: in trying to identify which aspects of herself could be the reason of the harassment ("you could not see anything", "a loosely fit *salwar kameez*", "not even glasses shades") she reveals self-blame women experience, internalized as a defence-mechanism. The staring look externalized her perception of her body, now seen from a third person perspective: as Berger had written, the gaze shapes women's relation to themselves, rendering them to a "sight", an object of vision (1972, 47). Within this dynamic, she "others" herself, experiencing a form of disembodiment echoed by other women volunteers.

This highlighted self-awareness, translated as an urgent need to withdraw her body from space, resonates with feminist geographers' analysis on how women's bodies are made spatially constrained. Rose (1993), drawing from Young's work, describes how the masculine look's material inscription to a hyper self-awareness that women develop is connected to how they end up perceiving a sense of space as not their own:

"The threat of being seen and evaluated is one of the most objectifying processes to which the body is submitted, and argues that the constitution of our bodies as objects to be looked at encourages many of us to see ourselves as located in space. (...) Because our bodies are an object to us, we see ourselves as positioned in a space not our own. And that space can feel like an alien territory. Women's sense of embodiment can make space feel like a thousand piercing eyes; 'location is about vulnerability'. This produces a sense of space as something tricky, something to be negotiated, a hazardous arena." (146)

Mahenoor Raphick, a graduate of NCA, has powerfully explored the relationship between the masculine gaze and embodiment, framing it as a contested field of power, and challenging the ways the female body is objectified and disciplined.

Her work ***Looking at You, Looking at Me*** is an in-depth audiovisual inquiry into the way the masculine gaze unfolds and into the physical and psychological effects on women as they navigate the city. Her art becomes a multimodal tool that captures a dense emotional landscape, which exposes and subverts the way patriarchy spatially operates. I situate Mahenoor's work in relation to Laura Mulvey's psychoanalytical exploration on the "male gaze", developed to describe how cinematic narratives produce modes of looking that objectify women through specific visual narrative strategies. I met Mahenoor, who had participated in the call for *Aurat March's* posters, during my first fieldwork in Lahore. While her poster had been published in the collective's social media page, she could not attend the march due to her family's disapproval of the event. At that time, she was 23 years old, living in a hostel for working women adjacent to NCA, where she was completing her studies. Less than a year from that time she would have had her graduating ceremony, to which she kindly invited me. Mahenoor often explored the narrow lanes of *Anārkalī* in search of art material, thus experiencing daily encounters and interactions that informed her work. When I visited the exhibition in late January 2023, her work was presented in a dedicated room, integrating videos and material elements.



Fig. 10: “Looking at You, Looking at Me”. Thesis Display at the National College of Arts in Lahore. Mahenoor Raphick. January 2023. Source: Photo by the author.

A panel on the display space read (Figure 10):

“Men have a terrible staring habit, and no one seems to want to talk about it. People feel isolated by the consistent, evasive stares from men yet when they’re called out they see unhinged by the act. The mask symbolises the consistent stares from men, and my work is a reflection of how women feel when they get stared at.”

The work comprised an audio-visual narrative composed in two parts and a photographic exhibition. Mahenoor’s project reveals the unsettling and destabilizing dynamics of the gaze, unfolding as a dual process: excavating the gaze in which the woman feels trapped, and exploring the bodily and emotional effects that the gaze produces. In her renowned work, Mulvey (1975) argued that within the cinematic narrative, voyeurism and scopophilia intersect through the male gaze, producing women as objects of visual pleasure. While **voyeurism** actively distances the viewer from what is looked at, asserting a form of control and surveillance, scopophilia constructs women as beautiful, and therefore objectifies too, through visual mechanisms that narrow the distance, such as extreme close-ups that scrutinize the body, producing the woman as an object in an intimate relation to the spectator. These two processes often overlap and merge, articulated through the spatial and visual organization of the cinematic narrative.

The **first part**⁴³ lingers on the gaze itself and its “anatomy”: a masked individual silently appears at various points in *Anārkālī*, staring at the observer, presumed to be a woman, emerging from narrow lanes, crossroads, tea stalls, edges of *dhabas* or inside clothing shops. As the narrative unfolds, the gazes multiply, with more masked men appearing obliquely throughout the space. The black and white imagery emphasizes the contours, lines and shapes of the figures, turning the masked men into shadows that emerge and dissolve along street corners, from the dark lanes, framed by the shop windows, or reflected in puddles. Here, however, the *voyeur* is fully revealed: the gaze is subverted, as the spectator watching the video does not adopt the perspective of the hidden observer. Instead of identifying with the traditionally concealed male gaze, the spectator aligns with the woman’s point of view, seeing clearly how the voyeur-observer looks. Initially the long shots reproduce the effects of a prolonged stare, lingering unbearably on the surfaces of the bodies. As shots shorten, the rhythm made by the succession of breaths and heartbeats accelerates, intensifying anxiety and other unsettling emotions. In the **second video**⁴⁴, a group of young women, dressed in flowing white garments, run through the dark maze-like lanes of *Anārkālī*, frequently looking back. As the narrative progresses, a series of close-ups progressively narrows the visual field, suggesting significant passages: first, a dialectical exchange between women’s eyes and those of the mask figure, whose eyes in the mask seen from close, have multiplied. In this intense encounter, women’s bodies are turned into mannequins: as the camera zooms on their hips, limbs, and breasts, the narrative exposes the objectifying gaze they endure. Mulvey (1975) argued that close-ups in cinema are often used to portray women as passive objects, isolating body fragments which are fetishized and sexualized for the pleasure of the male spectator. In Mahenoor’s work, however, close-ups reveal how objectification occurs, compelling the spectator to confront the way they gaze at other women. In another frame, their bodies appear frozen, with thin garments transferred into transparent plastic wraps that fail to protect the nudity in which the body is forced to. Printed in the exhibition space, these images show women

⁴³ @mahenoorphick, “looking at you, looking at me”. *Instagram*, February 5, 2023
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CoSkKV4jnvD/>

⁴⁴ @mahenoorphick, “looking at you, looking at me”. *Instagram*, February 5, 2023
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CoUuPBjZB3/>

crouched on the floor, shrouded in plastic, with their faces obscured, accompanied by a note: *“I feel suffocated”*. In the last scene, the narrative undergoes an unexpected reversal: the four women, previously seeming to escape from the daunting man, now are facing him, confronting him, as he appears trapped against a wall. By presenting their backs to the spectator, the women reverse the power dynamic to which they are usually subjected to: they are now “returning the gaze”, reclaiming and asserting control over their visibility and visibility, positioning themselves as active agents within the cinematic space of *Anārkālī*. Drawing on Rose (1993), I argue that feminist visual practices construct a spectating position that neither reproduces the dominant masculine gaze nor posits an essentialist “womanly” alternative. Rather than offering a “feminine countergaze” (a binary that feminist geographers have long critiqued), these works instead propose ways of seeing that disrupt the *voyeurism* and *scopophilia* that underpin masculinist visuality. Mahenoor and Mehak’s works disrupt dominant modes of representation in visual culture rooted in an objective, singular, detached masculine spectator by offering subversive strategies of positioning, scale, perspective and fragmentation which unsettle the structure of the male/masculinist gaze. By manipulating and laying bare the mechanisms of this gaze, the authors construct another “way of seeing”, one that contests masculine visual order and dominance, by foregrounding the lived realities, the emotional sphere and by exploring the relational space in which gendered hierarchies are reproduced.

2. 4. Feminist Claims to the City

2. 4.1 “Dreamscaping” Lahore: Aurat March Poster 2023

“I collaged all the pictures I had ever taken in Lahore! (she smiles happily) I was like these girls deserve to occupy space (she laughs)... in the city!” (Laiba, February 23, 2023)

Cities are marked by semantic concentration, density of meanings, saturated with history, recollections, signs, memories. Laiba and Aleen, childhood friends, articulated a cartography of Lahore for 2023’s *Aurat March* poster (Figure 11). At that time, as Laiba

was pursuing a master's degree abroad and Aleen was in Lahore, their creative collaboration unfolded online, sustained by extensive conversations grounded in shared memories and affective ties to the city. Together they reflected on how the sky's tones should be, which bodies should belong, and which uncomfortable presences had to be excluded. Their friendship became a site of world-making: the collage unfolded through an intimate search across photographs and recollections of family winter picnics at *Shālimār* Garden and moments of joy embedded in the city's landscapes. One summer afternoon, I managed to reach Laiba, at the time when I had come back to Italy and she was in the United Kingdom, working on her thesis.

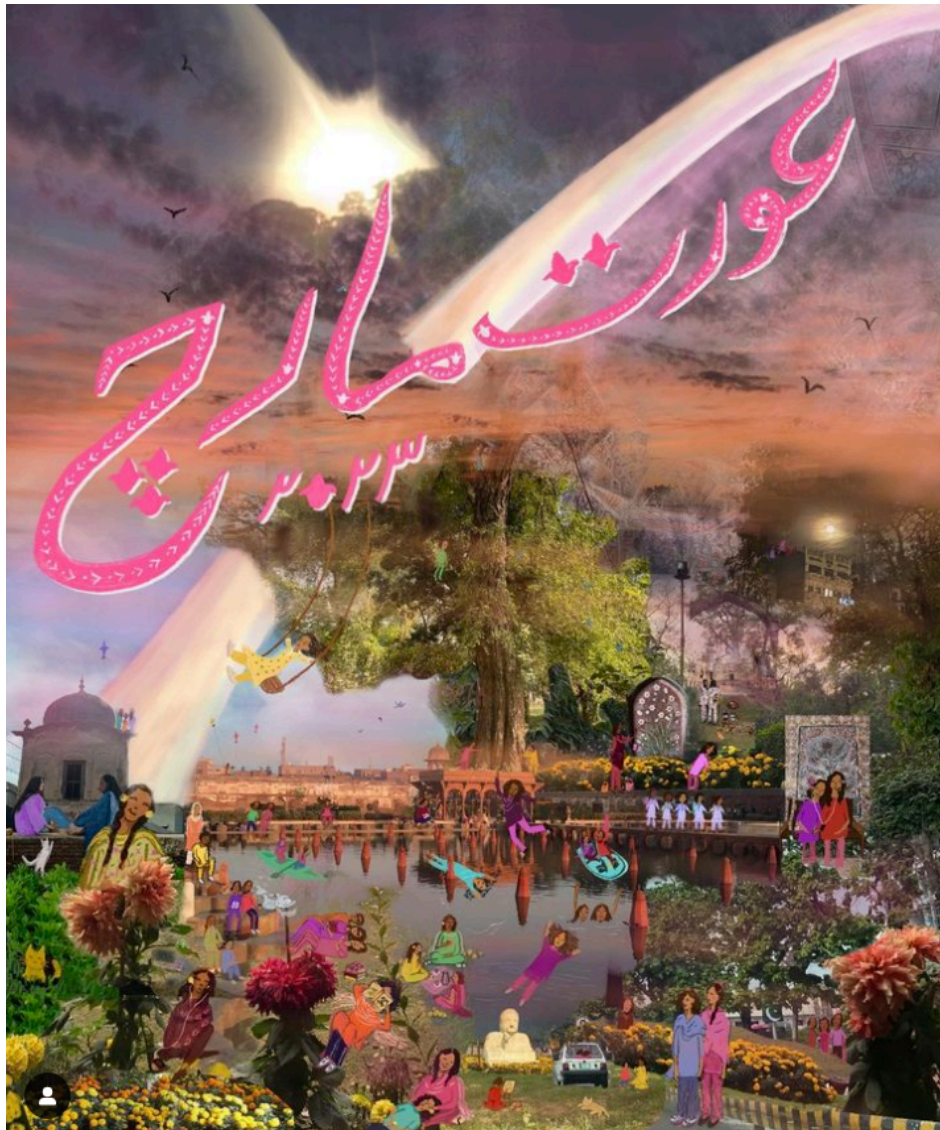


Fig. 11. *Aurat March 2023 Main Poster*. Source: @aurat march lahore, Instagram, February 20, 2023 ⁴⁵

The illustration depicts women at leisure, and unlike their marginal presence in public space, they fill every visible inch of the canvas, as to express an instinctive need for visibility. The singular viewpoint of the omniscient masculine observer is displaced by a network of interactions, each situated in a contingent position defined through relationships with friends. Alone or in small groups, they are busy having fun, as friendship defies patriarchal logics: there are bodies with other bodies, reading, chitchatting, laughing, enjoying nature, with no imperative to reproductive labours. The landscape is presented not as something to be owned or exploited, but as a place to be experienced, a site of harmony where relations are shaped by tenderness and caring for humans and the land. Leisure is claimed as rightful, and their presence in public space becomes a celebration of care and joy. Women lie down unbothered by how their bodies occupy space, leaving behind the usual self-surveillance that accompanies them everywhere they go, as they stretch out on the grass. There is no concern about being the object of male harassment or unwanted staring, about the angle of their posture, or about whether their dupattas have slipped from their shoulders. Schoolgirls walk along the perimeter of a pond while others perch on its edges, holding hands. A girl swings from the majestic tree of *Shālimār* Garden, one of the landscape's iconic symbols in a city long known as the "city of gardens" (Hasan 1991) mirroring *Mughāl* and later colonial interventions on the urban landscape. The garden appears as a synthesis of layers of different arts: architecture, poetry, music, miniature painting, merged with each other. It seems to reflect what prominent writer Bapsi Sidhwa described "Lahori culture" as characterized by "being in love with everything around you", a sentiment animated by the city's "cultural aliveness, its festivals, poetry, music, architecture, and, of course, the sensuality of its gardens, their fragrances, and their flowers" (2006, 227-9).

This imagined garden-scape recalls the textures of Lahore's spatialities: the *Mughāl*'s *Shālimār* Gardens, families' destination in the peripheries of the city, or the semi-hidden botanical expanse of *Bāgh-e-Jinnāh* (former Lawrence Gardens), with its intricate and

⁴⁵ <https://www.instagram.com/p/Co4-D-JMoxA/>

dark path suitable for couples eschewing public gazes. *Nāsir Bāgh*, near the old city and familiar to student protests, or Model Town, situated at the centre of the colonial residential society where volunteers hold their meetings. Humans, animals, birds, and insects coexist amid the fragrances of blossoms carefully planted across the city's public spaces. Lahore appears in spring, the season most cherished by its residents, now shortened each passing year by the gray, polluted winters, the scorching heat of summers and humid monsoons. It is the season once marked by *Basant*, when Lahoris celebrated the arrival of spring by flying kites from the Walled City, the repository of Punjab's layered histories, which emerges in the background where women are populating the rooftops. Banned in 2007, *Basant* still holds a profound cultural significance for Lahoris, as it used to be one of the few festivals celebrating the cultural heritage: remembered by volunteers as one of the few childhood moments of collective joy and expression of belonging beyond nationalistic or religious frameworks⁴⁶. Aleen and Laiba's gazes reimagine a land through attention to details, thus challenging the grand sweep of the masculinist gaze. Susan Ford, discussing women's late-Victorian England's garden representations, argued that gardens, through both their design and in the small-scale pleasures they offer, embody one form of "non-phallogocentric looking". (Rose 1993, 112). "I wanted to reimagine the city, and all of these things already exist like I have never changed any infrastructure, I just... *distilled it*", Laiba told me (Laiba, February 23, 2023). In the overlapping layers, the built fabric of Lahore resurfaces: miniature paintings and frescoes adorning mosques and mausoleums, decorative floral motifs testifying to the Sikh and *Mughāl* periods of aesthetic richness and multifaceted histories. Since Independence, the city's landscape has increasingly been overwritten with markers such as tanks, missiles, statues, and monuments emphasizing religious and military pride. "I hate this! What can the world be without those monuments? If I strip a city of these.. and I take them away... *What is left?* And *what marks* a city, do you know?" Laiba asked me (Laiba, February 23, 2023). Having grown up in a military district, she prefers to imagine women visiting heritage sites scattered across Lahore's geography, which are structures often neglected, overshadowed by global capital and

⁴⁶ Basant was re-established in Lahore in February 2026, when the Punjab Government announced its return after 20 years. However, the festival was under strict surveillance, and measures were taken. Among these, controversial the ban of 132 punjabi songs designed as "objectionable" (Shahzad 2026)

real-estate development that replaces history with parking lots, highways, and gated communities. The city of gardens struggles to breathe amid proliferating cars, construction sites, and development projects justified in the name of progress and smart-city futures. As the sun sets, changing hues of the pinkish sky, women still occupy public space, defying social regulations that urge them home by *maghreb*, the evening prayer. In the artwork, women remain indifferent to the imminent darkness and the way it transforms the city, when they have to carefully ponder whether to be outside, where to walk or wait for a cab, calculating safety and risk.

According to artist Sheba Chhacchi (Powers and Chhacchi 2021), women have been representing the landscape in radically different ways, by emphasizing relational connections, different and contrasting subjective experiences, flows and entanglements through techniques such as bird eye view or dreamlike painting. Similarly, this city's cartography emerges as a collage of photos as well as everyday lived and desired practices, hopes and longings, memories and future imaginaries that Laiba and Aleen articulate. Above all, the dense affective landscape is formed by chosen relationships: friendship offers an alternative and solid emotional framework to explore, navigate and reimagine a city. For Laiba, the importance of cultivating relations among women and sustaining communities of care was deeply shaped by the environment in which she was educated. As she described it, her school fostered a culture centered on women's education, solidarity, and mutual care, a space "where one can learn from each other" (Laiba, February 23, 2023). It was only when she attended her first *Aurat March*, after finishing her school, and unexpectedly encountered her school principal that she came to recognize how profoundly this environment had been shaped by her principal's long-standing involvement in women's movements, by her particular sensibility and advocacy for education. Reflecting on the Lahore that she and Aleen had imagined together, Laiba recalled: "When we finished making it we were just talking, and talking about girls having fun. You know? And then became so *sad like 'why cant we live here!'* I was like 'this is a walking city, it is so safe'. We were so sad because we were like... 'When can this happen?'" (Laiba, February 23, 2023). In turn, I asked myself: How might friendship transform the very experience of the city?

Shilpa Phadke, leading feminist scholar on gender and space in South Asia, argues that women's practices of loitering unfold within "hostile cities", where bodies are marked as "unfriendly" (2013). As discussed earlier, this unfriendliness (experienced as discomfort or fear) is not inherent to places or people but is relational, contingent to temporality, infrastructures, and the ways individuals are read through markers such as class, gender, social status, or perceived sexual threat. Some spaces, as will be explored, are simultaneously charged with intensity and contrasting meanings: parks, gardens, and marketplaces, for instance, are sites where sexual harassment restricts women's mobilities while also remaining preferred locations for loitering. In this perspective, women's access to public space on their own terms, centering loitering and fun, does not imply conditional safety, but rather a claim to the right to take risks. Building on this framework, **I ask what does it mean for *Aurat March's* volunteers to desire and access spaces that are perceived as hostile?** In this section, I draw on Phadke (2005; 2011; 2012) and broader feminist scholarship on gender and space to examine loitering as a central place-making practice through which women volunteers re-signify their presence and mobility in the city and articulate other forms of belonging. How does leisure function as a feminist political claim, and how do volunteers negotiate it through everyday spatial practices? How does loitering give shape to the city's imagined geography? How are urban spatialities perceived as hostile, desired and negotiated, and what does it mean to seek access to public space despite its hostility?

2. 4.2 Gardens as microcosms of leisure

"They are all here, they are enjoying the sun, the sunset is like a pink hue and they are all having a great time and I was like... When I ever felt that? And I have, we do go to parks.. There is a very safe park called Pologram next to my house. It is like an army sort of park. So they station men everywhere. And during covid I would go there a lot and I would run. Even during that, men would approach me saying "Oh you are not running well, like let me teach you how to run! And then they would try to say things like 'Oh, do you have a boyfriend? Why are you alone?' And I just like... I just wanted to draw unbothered women, like happy women! Yes, it is utopian and it is just sad that we are not having that! (she giggles) It is really upsetting! There is no chance to lay on the grass in Shalimar Bagh, you know? And if you do, there is some guy who is gonna be like 'This is inappropriate! Get off!' You know, there is this Instagram... 'Women at leisure'. Like Pakistani women just enjoying themselves, do you know about it?" (Laiba, February 23, 2023).

During the interview, Laiba, co-creator of 2023 *Aurat March* poster, repeatedly expressed her frustration at the inability to freely inhabit the city, illustrating how male-dominated social norms spatially operate to limit women's capacity to experience the urban environment. The project mentioned by Laiba, "*Basanti: Women at Leisure*"⁴⁷, was imagined by the Indian artist Surabhi Yadav who pointed at how leisure encompasses a spatial dimension: "*When we are supposed to be nowhere, where do we go?*" (2023). The "nowhere" opens up a sphere in which women are not obliged to respond to either productive or reproductive duties, that of leisure; the act of "going" towards this space, I argue, describes a movement which encompasses both symbolic and physical dimensions. Women engage in practices of self-nurturing, healing, recreation, and self-expression, attending to their psychological and physical wellbeing. At the same time, leisure is cultivated in concrete spatial realities, which are continuously transformed and re-signified through women's everyday practices. How does leisure centers feminist liberation? How does it spatially unfold?

In the course of my interviews with volunteers, leisure was repeatedly described as a need, often unfulfilled and incomplete, pursued in the interstices of how patriarchy has shaped women's lives, constrained between work, study and family duties. In several contributions examining leisure practices from a feminist lens (Parry 2019; Phadke 2011, 2020; Kirmani 2020; Scraton and Watson 1998, 2015), leisure entails the possibility of pleasure and self-expression as integral to feminist liberation, challenging how patriarchy restricts women's ownership over their time and access to everyday mundane practices and spatialities. Parry and Fullagar (2013) argued that leisure is "relationally" practiced within gendered norms entailing "caring for others (in families and friendships), caring about one's embodied self and care expressed through connections with nonhuman otherness (plants, animals, places)" (576). Gardens and parks emerge in volunteers' narratives as longed-for spaces, understood as layered environments offering relief from the city's intense rhythms and social control, and to experience tranquillity and silence amid flourishing nature. As illustrated in Laiba and Aleen's poster, more than mere peace, gardens emerge as microcosms allowing

⁴⁷ https://www.instagram.com/women_at_leisure/

self-expression, providing a space to linger in leisure activities, sharing food, being idle and resting, alone or collectively.

During my fieldwork, many volunteer meetings took place in parks scattered across the city. By providing a peaceful environment allowing leisurely forms of urban dwelling, parks shaped the ways volunteers gathered, providing accessible, serene, and ideal places that facilitated community-building while also affording a sense of privacy for both political discussion and chit chats. The spatial experience of parks provided for feminist organizing a time of tranquillity, blurring the boundaries between politics and leisure, and reworking gendered norms of women's presence and enjoyment in public spaces. During the meetings, we often bought *chāī* or coffee from hawkers in the parks, often ending in chit chats and photos under the shade of a tree. Street cats would approach us, prompting us to play and feed them, while discussing fund raising and mobilization. Sometimes men would also approach us, drawn by the unusual sight of upper class women speaking loudly, laughing and openly enjoying “alone”. Leisure transformed the park into a site of feminist politics and a space for negotiating and challenging gendered norms of urban life and public visibility.

Significantly, the fascination with gardens is deeply rooted in Lahoris’ everyday “**imagined geography**” (De 2004), a concept that encompasses the perceptions, narratives, and lived experiences through which residents shape their cultural understanding of the city. Beyond their residential or funerary functions, Lahore’s *Mughāl* gardens were designed for rest and pleasure, a legacy that, as Suvorova (2021) observes, underpins the stereotypical Lahori’s routine, “probably stem[ming] from centuries of garden pastime” (103), which reflects how open-air socialization has long structured urban life across social classes. Nevile’s memoir (2016) describes historical gardens such as *Shālimār* and *Jahāngīr’s* Tomb as nostalgic picnic spots, while Laiba and Aleen, authors of the poster, similarly evoke *Shālimār* Garden through memories of family outings rather than merely as landmarks. However, the narrative shifts when women volunteers seek to access these spaces alone, as they face substantial constraints. Gendered violence is a common experience that renders these spaces ambivalent, simultaneously shaped by the desire to wander and enjoy, and by the

threats that make leisure often inaccessible as it is frequently disrupted by uncomfortable encounters. Iqra, whose experience in navigating spatial regulation was outlined in the second paragraph, recounted her efforts to cultivate moments of solitude in which she could experience joy, peace, and engage with nature. However, for her these experiences were limited by the fear of potential violence and the insecurity associated with being alone, particularly in empty or isolated settings. Leisure, in her narration, emerges as a contested practice, carved out in fleeting and carefully negotiated moments.

I don't wanna talk about the things that have happened at Minār-e-Pākistān, the videos that we have seen (she pauses). I have never stepped foot in that park. I go to Bādshāhī Mosque a lot, cause I really like it. I am a history person, but I just sightstep the entire pathway, I just walk on the footpath strictly not crossing in the grass. I really like Bāgh-e-Jinnāh! I try to go there just to look at the flowers, whenever it is flower season I like to go to parks and look at the flowers. (...) I remember that I stole two hours out of my day from work to go to Jallo Park because there was a flower exhibition and it was beautiful. It was raining, I was alone... I videocalled my dad and I showed it to him. I loved the flowers, I have absolutely enjoyed looking at them! There was nobody there because it was raining at that time the park was empty and my dad was like 'you know you should come back right now because it is an empty place and you are at a park and it would be very easy to hurt you right now'. But that moment was so nice, I loved looking at the flowers. I don't have the time to have that leisure, that idleness, that joy... ” (Iqra, July 10, 2023)

In claiming her time for pleasurable activities such as strolling among flower beds or visiting historical gardens, Iqra simultaneously regulates her movements (staying on footpaths, remaining vigilant) pointing at how leisure is continually negotiated in relation to fear. Her narrative illustrates how leisure is contemporarily a spatial claim and a form of self-exploration, a chance to drift and to daydream, nurturing subjectivities and the inner life and, in this sense, central in feminist politics. It emerges as a daily deliberate negotiation of desire, bodily presence, and social norms, and therefore it is politically meaningful, challenging normative gendered expectations of where women “belong” in the city. Mostly, her narrative points out that leisure sheds light on the differential access and ownership of time, which unfold gender hierarchies when looking at who is allowed, for example, to sit carefree, to wander, to visit a place out of curiosity, to take time to be idle or to explore their interests. The ability to occupy space and engage in leisure shifts across the life course, as patriarchal norms regulate women’s presence in public spaces, granting greater freedom when they are no longer bound to domestic,

caregiving or productive labor. As Iqra recounted, this was evident in her society's park, where older women were able to occupy space and enjoy leisure time more freely.

"They made some men probably pick up a very heavy bench bringing it right to the next bench, so that they were two benches facing each other, without skipping any single day! These eight women would be talking from 4 pm to 6.30-7 pm, when there would be maghrib - azan when everybody would go home. One thing perhaps was just to watch over the rest of us all the kids that were playing in the park but the second thing was just gossip! We hated them because if you were playing cricket and the ball went to them they would start scolding you hit us! But now that I think about it they were just having fun and in my head a park was just for kids and what were they doing there? (...) They were friends, and they were not having any responsibilities! I guess 'cause they were older women. So they were free to chat. They had their prayers with them, and they all showed up looking a little religious but (she laughs) their discussions were anything but... (she laughs) a gossip circle!" (Iqra, July 10, 2023)

Parks are contested spaces in which different categories of people produce and negotiate narratives of appropriate use. Iqra's childhood perception that parks were "just for kids" reflects a normative understanding of leisure as age- and gender-specific, where women's prolonged presence appeared anomalous. In a society where women's presence in public is widely accepted only when tied to a clear purpose (Phadke et al., 2011), the performance of piety (through practices such as carrying prayer beads or appearing visibly religious) can be read as a strategic adherence to a politics of respectability. At the same time women, through chatting and gossiping, transform leisure into a form of informal political practice that enables community-making and asserts women's right to occupy public space on their own. As discussed earlier in the chapter, "purpose" functions as a key mechanism through which patriarchy legitimizes and regulates women's presence in public space and, as Ranade (2007) showed in her participatory research with women in Mumbai, it becomes an internalized strategy through which women craft their spatial trajectories (by selecting particular routes, destinations, and rhythms) to produce a sense of safety by performing respectability. Sadia Khatri, an organizer of the *Aurat March* in Karachi, has argued that feminist oppression is grounded in the way the binary of pleasure/purpose is intertwined and supports spatial segregation:

"It is only the binary of pleasure and purpose that keep intact the binary of public and private. Women don't step outside, either because the streets are pronounced unsafe for us, or because, what need do women have of everyday pleasure? We have duties to tend to, we have men whose honour is located in our bodies." (Khatri 2019)

Feminist liberation, therefore, entails a “**politics of pleasure**” (Khatri 2019), grounded in women’s control over their bodies, desires, time, and spatial practices. Claiming leisure and ordinary presence in public thus becomes an act disrupting normative patriarchal expectations of respectability, rendering women’s presence in public legitimate only when tied to duty or necessity. Returning to Surabhi Yadav, the artist argues that leisure is essential “not just because of who we become when we are at leisure but also because of its *revelation of who we actually are*”. In this sense, by engaging in leisure, both individually and collectively, as tool for self-actualization and exploration, women actively contest oppressive sociocultural structures that regulate their autonomy by controlling their everyday lives, from what they should wear and where they can go, to, ultimately, what renders them worthy.

2. 4.3 Loitering: Friendship as World-Making

“I do travel alone, I do some things, even explore. I have been to the zoo, alone! But I haven’t been to a park alone, I don’t feel safe. And I think that if I am alone I wouldn’t go to a park. It is not very safe but... with Aurat March, with you guys... (she pauses) it was so fun reclaiming that space, reclaiming, you know... Exploring nature, sitting there just with your friends... It feels liberating!” (Jia, July 19, 2023)

Jia, a young architectural professional, spoke enthusiastically about how exploring Lahore’s urban landscape had become more accessible thanks to the friendships she had formed by volunteering at *Aurat March*. Having grown up in a predominantly middle-class neighbourhood in western Lahore, Jia had only recently begun travelling and exploring the city on her own, driven by a fascination with Lahore and a desire to discover its different spaces. Yet there were still places she did not dare to step in alone, such as parks, spaces that, almost a year earlier, had nevertheless become sites of collective celebration when we had gathered to celebrate her twenty-third birthday. In 2023, I participated with Jia and other volunteers in an outreach activity in *Harbanspūra*, a peripheral, lower-income area that *Aurat March* had been supporting over the years by providing a safe space to the community of women workers to gather and to articulate their demands. Following that meeting, we decided to explore the surrounding

neighbourhoods as few of us knew that it hosted hidden heritage sites. This unplanned excursion unfolded as an adventure across sub-urban areas containing sedimented histories: as we moved through these spaces, we speculated with curiosity about the past landscape of Lahore while noticing how local histories, particularly of women, had been rendered marginal. We visited architectural remains, strongly damaged, including *Mughal* monuments such as the Tomb of *Dāī Angā* in *Begampūra* and the *Mughalpūra* complex (Fig.1), sites rendered difficult to access because of neglect and fading from public memory. Moving together by car and on foot, we conversed, took selfies and photographs from rooftops, mourning the fading decorations consumed by neglect and pollution, and joking about the once-flourishing palaces now used as sets for emerging clothing brands. We stopped midway to chat about our personal lives while sipping chai and having snacks, getting to know each other beyond the ordinary meetings. That late February afternoon, as spring temperature was rising, was an exciting moment of strolling, exploration, laughter, accompanied by a sense of safety generated by our being together, and it constituted a rare moment of collective loitering that reconfigured our relationships with the city. Such moments did not recur during my subsequent years in Lahore, yet the fun and freedom experienced that afternoon was frequently remembered and shared on our social media.

Over the past two decades, South Asian scholarship has increasingly examined women's relationship with the urban scape centering loitering as a feminist claim to the city, in relation to broader debates around access, safety and fun (Phadke et al., 2011). According to them, fun "undermines the very possibility of order and control" in a society in which "ideas of propriety are often centred on controlling women's movements" and where women's presence in public is acceptable with a purpose (113). This focus has also coincided with the rise of urban collectives across South Asia that have incorporated such practices into their politics, organizing interventions including night walks (#WalkAlone), 'SlutWalks', and sleepovers in public parks ('Meet to Sleep') (Phadke et al 2011; Savory Fuller 2019; Taneja 2019), highlighting the transformative potential of loitering to reimagine urban spaces as more diverse, pleasurable, and inclusive (Phadke 2012). In Pakistan, *Girls at Dhābās* (G@D) emerged as the main feminist expression of spatial politics prior to the *Aurat March*, with many members,

including Khatri, later becoming its organizers. Echoing broader transregional experiments, such as “Why Loiter?” In India, G@D framed loitering as a collective feminist praxis, contesting gendered regimes of access to public space and public visibility, which remains deeply political across South Asia (Cheema 2023). This practice unfolded through everyday actions, such as taking photos while sipping chai at road stalls, organizing collective bicycle rides or playing cricket in parking lots. Nida Kirmani (2020), in her study of women’s loitering practices in Lyari, Karachi, contends that centering fun as an analytical lens is crucial for understanding how women experience the city beyond frameworks focused solely on fear and violence. Phadke (2020) also argues that centering on the non-productive fun, the “visceral sense of enjoyment” (283) at the heart of loitering, is functional in challenging societal gatekeeping anxieties about what counts as “real” or “pure” feminism within a neoliberal system, and rather highlights subjects that inhabit public spaces as citizens rather than merely as consumers. While scholarship on loitering has largely emphasized the centrality of the right to fun as a core aspect of feminist praxis (Kirmani 2020; Phadke 2020), less attention has been paid to friendship, which not only enables loitering practices, but also transforms the way women reimagine the city, its “imaginary geographies” (De 2004), and articulate shared forms of belonging. As Kern (2019) asks, what ways of being in a city are lost or foreclosed when female friendships are dismissed as disposable? For many volunteers, whose mobilities had been constrained by family obligations beyond study and work, participation in *Aurat March* played a significant role in cultivating new affective bonds and opening up opportunities to loiter together. For Iqra, who had previously shared the challenges of moving through urban spaces alone, volunteering provided a transformative opportunity to expand and reshape her access to the city.

“These things start when you are little, I think I went to Minār-i-Pākistān when I was 5 years old and I asked can I go up to the top and all the boys were going up to the top back then the lift was working and you could actually go to the top of Minār-i-Pākistān, and I was not allowed they didn't let me. Probably because I was a child! But I know the lift was full of men and there would have been no space for me. I wanted to do that, I wanted to go to the top, I wanted to see what Lahore looks like at the top of Minār-i-Pākistān... (she pauses and smiles) The thrill of that! So, you know, all the things everyone ever stopped me from doing with my friends, not just alone. So the idea of companionship and friendship, doing that with all the people I like, and I have come to like so many people that are involved in the march as well! So the march does in a way represents a place to meet your friends, a way of meeting your friends, of making friends. It is having fun, hanging out

with your friends, and doing it at places you have probably never been allowed to do, or where you have self-policed yourself and haven't really gone.” (Iqra, July 10, 2023)

For Phadke, hostile cities can be contested through the presence of “friendly bodies”, which extend beyond close friends to encompass a constellation of subjectivities that make public spaces more accessible and enjoyable. These may include groups of older women inhabiting parks, as in the case of Iqra, or the plurality of heterogenous communities, as observed by Mahira when recalling her time at *Bāgh-e-Jinnāh*. For the volunteers I talked to, friendship constituted a central practice for confronting the unfriendliness and unsafety of the city, not by eliminating risk, but by rendering the space negotiable, enabling women to loiter, inhabit, and engage in a wide range of activities. Friendship also affirms the value of aimless wandering and hanging out in streets without an explicit purpose, framing these practices as political acts that claim the right to pleasure, presence, and fun. In this sense, it can be viewed as place-making practice that, as Lubna, one of the first volunteers in Lahore argued, does not make spaces “safe” but rather “brave” (Lubna, March 19, 2024): it cultivates spaces of courage, where the support of friends allows women to contest and reshape the urban environment. Loitering, understood as a practice of desire, is therefore inseparable from friendship: it sustains women in negotiating risk and transforms perceptions of safety, turning even hostile spaces into sites of possibility. Ultimately, I argue that friendship acts as a compass for navigating the city and reconfiguring its geographies, envisioning not only what the city is, but what it could become. Drawing from Wunker’s elaboration (2017), I contend that friendship can be understood as a **world-making practice**, producing creative, disruptive and utopian relationships, practices and imaginaries that not only unsettle hetero-patriarchy, as well as binaries such as purpose/pleasure or public/ private, but trace radical possibilities, *other* words beyond the established ones. Returning to Laiba e Aleen, as cartographers overlapping their individual maps on top of each other, they presented an ecopoetics (Kapuria and Kumar 2022) of Lahore built through their friendship, revealing threads of encounters and of memories, capturing a rooted sense of belonging as well as desired possibilities. The friends create another city, where the militarized cityscape is unsettled and re-imagined through affective eco-cartographies that celebrate Lahore’s cultural and natural heritage, elevated as its

identity markers, reviving the spontaneous festive character for which it has been known: *Basant*, the Punjabi cultural festival of Lahore, banned in 2007, is now visible in the fading background, where women enjoy flying kites from the rooftops of the Old City.

2. 5. Street Utopias and Urban Possibilities in Emil's Art

In *City Words*, Allen argued that the city's built environment, across its architectural, symbolic, and material dimensions, emerges as a "juxtaposition of feelings", charged with meanings and affects experienced with varying intensities and shaped by relations of access and exclusion (1999, 71). Read through Massey's conceptualization of space (1994), in which places and their identities are constituted through articulations of social relations across scales, these feelings and meanings are not contained within a place but arise through spatial relations that "stretch beyond it, tying any particular locality into wider relations and processes in which other places are implicated too" (120). Building on Massey's argument, the symbolic and affective imaginaries embedded in material landscapes should therefore be analysed in relation to broader contexts, including political, economic and social processes occurring elsewhere, attending to spatial relations and connections that extend beyond territorial boundaries. When looking at Lahore's contemporary urbanism, it is therefore important to attend to State and army-led neoliberal projects and development schemes premised on dispossession and capital extraction as entailing wider translocal (capitalist) spatial relations which connect territories that both shape and transform them. Brenner (2000), exploring the context of capital accumulation, has argued that the ongoing process in which social relations are continually deterritorialized and reterritorialized across space "significantly unsettled and changed not only the material landscape (...) but the spatial imaginaries and ways of thinking about the place, impacting the way people feel and articulate forms of belonging" (xx).

Building on this discussion, this final section shifts attention to how Lahore's contemporary neoliberal urbanism shapes the **material and symbolic landscape**, which emerges as an affective and political terrain. These landscapes not only structure

women's urban trajectories, but also constitute sites where spatial imaginaries of belonging and community are produced and contested, and where processes of social exclusion and alienation are experienced along classed, gendered, and social lines.

In this last section, I draw from the artworks and experience of Emil, *Aurat March* volunteer who designed its posters in 2022⁴⁸ and 2024⁴⁹. Her experience illustrates how growing up, studying, and working in Lahore emerges within urban fragmentation, social exclusion and spatial segregation. Her personal artistic practice, articulated through isometric works and mazes, explores possible utopian and dystopian spatial imaginaries, by probing present desired ways of belonging, community and space while contesting the current ones experienced. This final section asks: How does contemporary urbanism, shaped by neoliberal development, configure the material and symbolic landscapes through which young women experience and navigate the city? Which forms of belonging are produced and reinforced, and which are erased or marginalized through specific spatial practices? How does art function as a critical tool to engage with dominant urban imaginaries and articulate alternative imagined geographies for the city beyond utopian or dystopian framings?

2. 5.1 Architectures of Forgetting

"With these dystopian isometric illustrations, this is how I see the world! And the whole point is that it is supposed to look absurd! But that is exactly how I see it, I think it is absurd!" (Emil, November 10, 2022)

During my fieldwork in Lahore, I met Emil on two occasions, both in DHA (Defence Housing Authority), the upper-middle class neighborhood where she had grown up and spent the majority of her time. At the time she was 23 years old, she held a master's degree in Literature from LUMS, one of the country's elite universities, and was working as a teacher in a college. Emil shared her passion for literature and cultural history, alongside which she cultivated interest in drawing, which she had recently translated

⁴⁸ @padpixie, AM Poster 2022 "Asal Insaf", *Instagram*, February 18, 2022.
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CalPy-1Mh0X/>

⁴⁹ @padpixie, AM Poster 2024, "Mera Vote Kahan Hai?" *Instagram*, March 1, 2024.
https://www.instagram.com/p/C3-swIXCL_y/?img_index=1

into digital art. She had been raised entirely within upper-middle-class areas of the city, where her education, work, and social life unfolded. Her parents exerted significant control over her mobility: as she explained to me, she was quite restricted, unable to move around independently and instead having to rely on her parents for car rides. Growing up in a gated, affluent neighborhood within Lahore's Defence area not only subjected her to heightened parental and social surveillance but also shaped her early socialization into the city's distinct cultural and symbolic codes, embedded in its material spatial landscape.

"Even if I am from Lahore, I know that everytime I go to Old Lahore, for example food street... Is it just that everybody wants to go to this place called Haveli not for the food, but for the view, to enjoy the experience of you know... The older parts of the city, the city that has some stings by Mughal history.. or.. so.. it's strange, because... A lot of us feel very removed from this part of the city. It feels like you are a tourist in your own city! And when I go to this trip, is so irrelevant but there was this history society back at LUMS and they had organized this little trip where we were going to visit different tomb sites of women of the Mughal area that were buried around in Lahore and it was very interesting to go there because there were many places in the city.. not even the older part of the city! It was at random points in Lahore... Tou yeah! I am from Lahore (she giggles a bit), whatever part of Lahore I am from. I am from some small parts of Lahore which is definitely a bubble within Lahore!" (Emil, November 10, 2022)

In Emil's perspective, the urban scape emerges as a patchwork of "bubbles", as separated enclaves resulting from the way capital development and infrastructural projects have fragmented the city and increased spatial segregation. In contraposition to those, the old parts of the city is enshrined as material residues surviving and sandwiched between commercial buildings and residential areas, and becomes something to make experience of, rather than a layered history of local connections, lived daily practices, memories, and stories. Mughal tombs, mausoleums, *havelis*, old neighbourhoods represent an "a touristic experience" for the residents of gated societies, who are visitors or students on school trips. This contrasts with upper-class formations shaped by elite education and lifestyles that privilege English and Westernised orientations, or Urdu as a vehicle of religious nationalism. Concurrently, the city's historical material landscape and the narratives it embodies are subject to erosion and neglect, while urban development elsewhere foregrounds monuments associated with national militarism and religious identity. In their study of Karachi's largest privately

owned gated community, *Bahrā* Town, Rajani and Islam (2021) describe “**architectures of forgetting**” as a defining feature of contemporary urbanism in the country. With this expression they illustrate how under the rhetoric of progress and development, neoliberal processes enact the erasure of local geographies, replacing them with foreign landscapes that seek to materialize a world-class city vision aligned with the global aspirations of Pakistan’s political and economic elite. In Lahore too this has been produced through **practices of boundary-making**, manifested in fenced and gated civil and military enclaves, as well as residential and commercial zones, where access is restricted and surveilled along classed lines. Marketed as lifestyle destinations, these projects reterritorialize the material landscape by reinscribing it with imported spatial meanings while simultaneously producing a lifestyle imaginary modeled on Western standards. This form of “corporate architecture” (Sargin 2004), characterized by iconic landmarks, monuments, and visual tropes, transposes global symbols of modernity into a broader Pakistani religious and military nationalist framework, sustained by narratives of progress and development. This reflects a similar process described by Srivastava (2012), in his work on national identity and urban space in India. According to him, globalized symbols of prestige, luxury and cosmopolitanism, once framed as confrontational or as a source of inferiority and a “crisis introduced by the encounter with the West” (66) have been increasingly understood as an idea that can exist *alongside* a modern Indian identity (or Muslim Pakistani) rather than posing a threat to it. Aasim Sajjad Akhtar (2022) depicts militarized Pakistani capitalism as the driving force behind widespread **processes of dispossession** across the country, with the residential real estate market, exemplified by developments such as DHA, constituting one of its most profitable manifestations. These “infrastructures of war” (61), realized through planned grids, commercial zones, high walls, and the ghettoization of surrounding villages, embody a neoliberal, militarized vision of urban transformation that inscribes the territory with selective landmarks while simultaneously erasing local histories, and displacing indigenous settlements. Within the context of ongoing military capitalist dispossession and patriarchal violence, Lahore’s local geographies, landmarks, and architectural features form dense sediments of layered histories linked to transregional South Asian architectural and cultural traditions that have been

progressively erased. Emil and other volunteers seek to (re)connect with these imaginaries, which offer a sense of indigenous belonging beyond dominant narratives of nationalism, conflict, and belligerence, foregrounding a “belonging to the land that resists patriarchal religious nationalism” (Rahman 2021, 3). These local geographies enact identities and urban imaginaries that volunteers strive to reclaim, reflecting cultural values and forms of belonging increasingly threatened by contemporary neoliberal urban restructuring.

During the interview, Emil showed me several artworks depicting what she described as a “dystopic *duniyā*”, rendered through isometric perspectives. These illustrations address themes of surveillance, of climate change and the pollution affecting Lahore, and of capitalist transformations of the urban environment. Across these works belonging is produced and marketed, tied to an artificially constructed and bounded landscape in which identities are shaped around consumption.

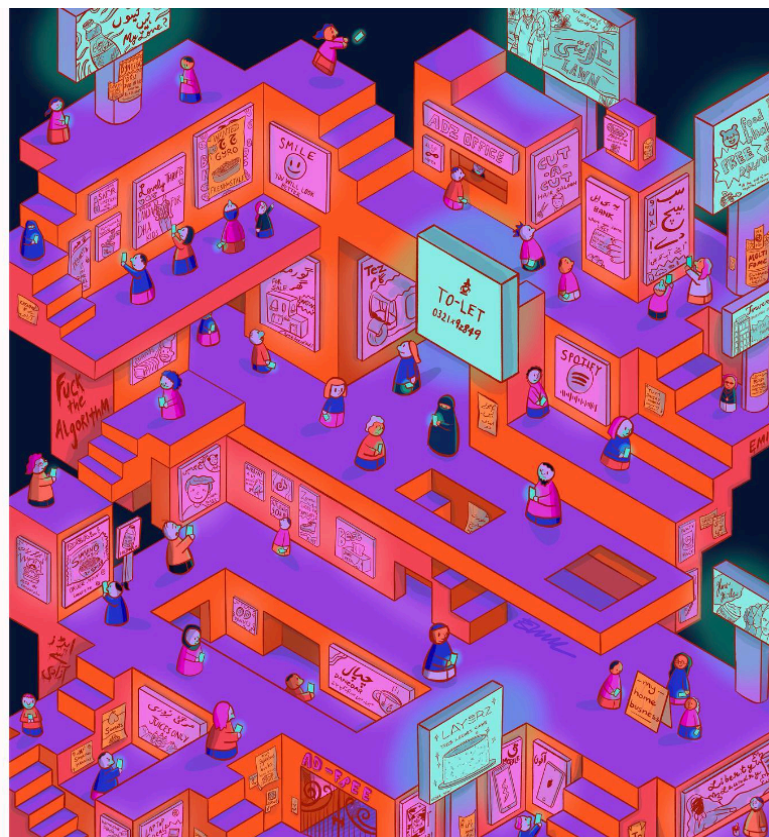


Fig. 12 “Adv-Hub”. Source: @padpixie, *Instagram*. Last Accessed February 2, 2023

In **Adv-Hub** (Figure 12) Emil depicted a dystopic maze-like cityscape whose architecture is dominated by disturbing fluorescent, neon-hued advertisements colonizing the urban infrastructure. In this landscape, the experience of the city is mediated through logics of consumption. The illustration evokes the structure of contemporary urban hubs, such as DHA, characterized by commercial zones interspersed with gated residential developments, where pervasive advertisements and billboards have colonized the landscape and actively shape, or “manipulate”, the attention of city dwellers. The maze reproduces a regularized spatial order, punctuated by the repetitive alternation of neon billboards and signage characteristic of landscapes situated at the intersection of commercial and residential zones. The work is rendered through a geometric, linear spatial form, mirroring the ways in which contemporary urbanism disciplines, organizes, and regulates social life. Emil’s work foregrounds how capitalist development and neoliberal urban projects inscribe the material landscape with new, consumption-based identities, reshaping how space and subjectivities are produced and experienced. While ostensibly displaying corporate identities, the work exposes the hypocrisy, violations, injustice, and sexism concealed within promotional slogans. Through subtle textual interventions, Emil alters corporate language by punning on brand slogans and subverting their intended messages, thereby performing critique without overt confrontation. For instance, the slogan of a bank, “Where you come first,” is reworked to read “Where you come last,” foregrounding experiences of exclusion and neglect. Similarly, a clothing brand implicated in labor exploitation is referenced through altered phrasing that exposes unpaid labor practices (“Lawn tou laun, hum paise sirf nahi dete”). Another billboard in DHA reading “Smile, you look better!” is recontextualized to reveal the disciplinary and gendered demands embedded in that message. Through these interventions, Emil’s art reinscribes the urban landscape with hidden yet disruptive meanings. The use of isometric illustration enables a distanced, schematic perspective that allows the artwork to “say a lot while remaining subtle,” and “being very political without being overtly political” (Emil, November 10, 2022):

“You would see ads everywhere in Lahore! I don’t think there is any place where you won’t see any commercials. I mean you won’t see them in shops but you will see them on your phone! There is no

space... Matlab, wherever it is a virtual space or a physical space, that capitalism has not seeped into. They try to exploit all this virtual real estate and physical real estate, it is almost as if they all are for commercialism and for consumerism, ki “accha, you have to sell something”. And I hate how many artists you know have fallen into that trap!” (Emil, November 10, 2022)

2. 5.2 Community in the City: Trinjan as Feminist Urban Praxis

In our first interview, Emil described her excitement at seeing her poster for *Aurat March 2022* displayed across various parts of the city where she normally was not allowed to be.

*“This is why I love my art, because even if my mobility is very restricted... I am not allowed to go out much. I remember that I had friends sending pictures ki I saw your poster here, LUMS main kafi logon ne lagaya tha [quite a lot of people had hung it]. I remember some pictures were taken. There were some places near the metro bus, so kuch lage the [there were some hung], some places around the city. It was nice because I felt like... **I got to say “main yahan hoon”! I am here”, you know? And you can’t do nothing about it!”** (Emil, November 10, 2022)*

After around one year, when I met her again, she had just completed a digital artwork titled *“Main Yahaan Hoon”* (Fig. 13), depicting a vibrant, utopian, all-women Lahore, whose title echoed the sentence she had shared on how art enabled her to exist in and engage with the city. We met in a coffee shop in DHA Phase 6, a recently developed commercial area situated in the periphery of Lahore and next to *Defence Raya Golf Resort*, characterized by elite restaurants, cafés, and bakeries, which I reached after traveling over forty minutes of crossing areas alternating fields and construction sites. Emil had gotten married, a transition that shaped her routine and her art too. As a married woman, she had acquired greater mobility than when living with her parents, allowing her to explore places, such as marketplaces, which she was earlier prevented from experiencing because being male-dominated, as she remembered how her parents warned her that *“Tumne nahī jānā, tum laṛkī ho, vahā pe ādmī hote haī”* (Emil, February 25, 2024). Her visit to one such marketplace, *Hāfiz Center*, with her husband prompted her to create work reflecting on spaces she had previously associated with danger, discomfort, and **hypervisibility**, socially surveilled environments that exemplify broader gendered dynamics in which women’s presence is restricted. In *“Main Yahaan*

Hoon” (Figure 13), Emil reimagined everyday urban spaces as a “street utopia”, weaving together different material landscapes, spatial practices and relations to articulate environments structured by safety, community, and belonging. In the work, **safety** is not achieved through surveillance, but rather from women’s collective and embodied presence and from being recognized as part of a shared community. Safety also entails the capacity to negotiate how one is seen, resisting both hypervisibility and invisibility that characterizes the way women inhabit space.

“The feeling of wanting to be seen on the street, not just as an object or someone’s sexual desire and not just something men can look at, but someone as just present in the street as a participant or as part of the community. Like that desire did sort of urge me to do this particular illustration kyunke... I love walking, I really like walking around. I love being a flaneur in my own way. Lekin I feel it is very difficult to be a flaneur in a city like Lahore, and this came from a place of deep desire... Kē kāsh If I could be... if Lahore was a city where I could walk!” (Emil, February 25, 2024)

Walking emerges as a central practice to establish an embodied relationship with urban space unmediated by walls, vehicles, windows or screens. In this sense, **belonging** becomes possible through experiencing safety, which enables alternative rhythms, flows, and modes of relation with the city. Spatially, this entails the possibility to stay, dwell, linger, and be present, to choose one’s paths and tempos without anxiety, fear or constraint.

“That sense of community amongst women. Ke women of different ages, also there little girls in the illustration that are running around there are these two schoolgirls that are having ice cream together... A lot of it was coming from this internal desire thing that I wish that I had. I was trying to put it all in one place, to create this little paradise kind of a place for myself. Ki okay, this is a utopia for me! There are no men here! (giggles) There is no man here! Koī bhī nahī hai!” (...) It feels very safe and it feels very comforting. This feels like a sweet cozy friendly place to be in.” (Emil, February 25, 2024)

In contemporary urban scape of residential gated societies safety is instead manufactured through regimes of security and control, criminalization of lower classes and widespread militarization through security checkpoints and CCTV cameras. Kirmani (2021) discusses how the mushrooming of gated communities and private security schemes in Pakistan is directly related to the increasing atmosphere of insecurity and fear over the past decades, where surveillance is organized as “a complex patchwork of security enclaves” (Paasche and Sidaway 2021, 50). In the same anthology, Noman

Ahmed's analysis of Karachi's hyper-securitization identifies multiple forms of barriers - both physical, such as walls, fences, barbed wires, and concrete blocks, and "silent" ones (including wall-chalking and flags) designed to restrict the mobility of groups constructed as threatening, particularly gender and ethnic minorities. Rather than providing safety, gated communities build exclusionary spaces whose infrastructures produce uncertainty, exacerbating social distance, class fragmentation, and residential segregation, and where women are equally, if not more, experiencing harassment.

This securitization and control enacted through urban regulation, or the "lasting legacy of colonialism" (Edensor and Jayne 2011, 19), reproduces a **colonial spatial imagination** that was institutionalized under British rule and rearticulated in postcolonial and neo-colonial forms. In *Making Lahore Modern* (2008), Glover demonstrates how colonial spatial imagination reshaped Lahore's fabric to reflect a desired relationship between colonial society and its material forms. Developments such as model housing schemes and bungalow estates (the elite "Civil Station") imposed a rigid spatial order, separating European zones from the allegedly chaotic native quarters. The military cantonment and bungalow estates, whose militarized aesthetics and infrastructures persist today in DHA and elsewhere, further entrenched racialized class hierarchies and social segregation (Qadeer 2023). This colonial imaginary of "civilized order" continues to inform contemporary urban governance in Lahore. Social interaction and community life too are increasingly displaced into surveilled, car-dependent enclaves detached from the wider city, where sociality itself becomes commodified.



Fig. 13: “Main Yahaan Hoon”. Source: @padpixie, *Instagram*, January 6, 2024 ⁵⁰

In Emil’s utopia, **sociality** inhabits the streets, actively reshaping the urban landscape through work, leisure, loitering, and other chores. The city is articulated through the foregrounding of details as central elements, disrupting the homogenized spatial order dominated by corporate chains. By attending to these details at a slower, more deliberate pace, the observer encounters additional layers of meaning, including “easter eggs, subtle visual elements embedded in the illustration that reference other works,

⁵⁰ https://www.instagram.com/p/C1wQ1_sM67h/?img_index=1

known individuals or lived experiences, thereby generating multiple hidden imaginaries and inscribing the land with her gaze.

“You can see the laundry here. So somebody is living here, saath saath someone is having a cup of chai. You won’t see like a bra hanging from a building! (giggles) Especially here! It is something that is so hush hush that you make sure that your laundry is not visible to someone. You get what I mean? You catch yourself being aware of these little things and try not to sort of accidentally hurt people who have nothing to do with you and your life! Because something as small as hanging your laundry could offend someone, could offend a man somewhere!” (Emil, February 25, 2024)

This dreamscape subverts modern global infrastructures also by incorporating traditional architectural forms, such as projecting windows and balconies (called *Jharokhā/bukhara*). These elements, adorned with intricate wood carvings characteristic of Punjabi *havēlīs* and Sikh-period monuments, reflect layered histories synthesizing *Rājput* and *Mughāl* influences (Hussain 2011), and remain visible in some palace ruins in the old neighbourhoods of Lahore. Architectural features such as wooden screens (*pinjras*), historically employed to regulate ventilation and control women’s visibility and privacy, are reimagined: women here occupy parapets openly, engaging in conversation and social interaction, thereby reasserting alternative modes of inhabiting these liminal spaces. The integration of such elements reflects an effort to embed local history and cultural heritage within the material urban fabric, challenging the erasure of vernacular architectural aesthetics and the homogenizing tendencies of contemporary, cement-dominated neoliberal development projects.

The built environment of gated societies and modern enclaves produces a new **cultural idea of community interaction** that diverges from the sociality historically characteristic of neighborhoods in Lahore. Contemporary urbanization manifests as fragmented, enclave-based spatial forms that generate cultural identities perceived as detached from local contexts, thereby eroding the historically “festive” Lahori social life grounded in shared public spaces and cross-class visibility. Emil’s illustrations reject such urban divisions and spatial segregation characteristic of neoliberal hubs, instead articulating a “**third space**” that integrates productive and reproductive labor within a women-centered community engaged in cultural, artistic, recreational, and leisurely

practices, including loitering. These material spaces dissolve rigid functional separations by merging residential, commercial, and recreational activities, proposing an alternative mode of inhabiting the city, one in which diverse forms of work, interest, and leisure coexist collectively. This modern vision of Lahore merges with *trinjan*, a Punjabi traditional women's gathering in which women would spin the wheel while engaging in conversations and singing, a concept that Emil encountered in her studies at LUMS. Significantly, the study of Punjabi language and literature from a postcolonial perspective has largely been accessible within elite educational contexts, whereas in most public and private schools, the colonial legacy continues to reinforce linguistic hierarchies that privilege Urdu and English, leaving Punjabi largely marginalised in formal curricula. Remarkably, her vision of an utopian urban landscape is informed by the (imagined) gendered relevance of this cultural institution, narrated through its postcolonial interpretation in an elite context where Punjabi students are often detached from their cultural and linguistic history.

"I was very curious about it [trinjan] because when I studied about it. It was mostly women who would sit together and do different things. But they would just sit together! Koi charkha chala rahi hai, someone is embroidering something, someone is cooking, or someone they are talking. Different things that they are doing, but doing it together! Jaisē I think chōṭē bacchē [small children], you go play, apnī game khel rahē ho but you are playing next to each other, right? I really like that, I love that concept, even if you are minding your own business, you are minding your business together! So that feeling of community! So I wanted that space also to feel like that, like a trinjan right? You are eating, maybe bring clothes for yourself, or jewelry, or bangles.. aap mehndi lagva rahe ho. Someone is sitting there with a mehndi cone, someone is getting something from a bakery, someone is getting french fries, someone is like their kids are running around. Someone is reading... that's me!" (Emil, February 25, 2024)

The street is populated by a range of women-led, small-scale working and creative activities, including an art school, a clothing boutique, a music shop, a driving school, a beauty salon, and Goflour, a café in Lahore that aims to economically empower working-class women, frequently visited by some of the volunteers I met. Emil decided to name several of these activities after women that hold particular significance to her:

"This is my mom's name, her name is S. which I turned into S. superstore. So I wanted to add some references of women who mean a lot to me! R. is R.'s little sister! And yahan there is R. is his other sister. And R. is the name of my mother in law! And then I added my khala's name here S., so I added.. And my cousin as well, F." (Emil, February 25, 2024)

This practice of **place-naming** operates as a symbolic intervention into a historically male-dominated spatial landscape, serving to inscribe women's presence while honoring their passions, creativity, and endeavors, frequently rendered invisible. These women-run enterprises, seen in shops and stalls selling jewelry, flowers, and local foods, do not function as tools to justify women's presence in public space with a purpose (productivity), as framed by patriarchal narratives, but operate as sites for cultivating personal interests, creativity and social relationships. Within this community, women also occupy roles conventionally associated with men. Women gather around a parked rickshaw, engage in street-side sociability, and sit openly at *dhābhā* to eat and converse, forms of public presence from which they are typically excluded or confined to "family sections" situated indoors. More radically, women perform music and dance openly in the streets, practices for which *Aurat March* volunteers have been accused of being characterless and lacking modesty. Rooftops, spaces often rendered unwelcoming to women due to contentious "visibility" (as domestic spaces exposed to starting male practices), are reimagined as sites of leisure and introspection, where a woman, Emil herself, reads beneath a tree emerging from the built fabric.

Emil populated the city with some Lahori women who have inspired her by asserting women's right to occupy the public sphere, such as AM artist Shehzil Malik, engrossed in mural-making, singer Amna Riaz and the social activist Wardah Noor, depicted on a motorbike. The scene depicts an intergenerational and socially heterogeneous community: elderly women in *sāṛīs* walk alongside schoolchildren at play; friends, mothers and daughters, single women, couples, and strangers from diverse social backgrounds gather to drink *chāī*, take photographs, apply *mehndī*, and share everyday moments. Through these embodied, quotidian practices, the space is collectively inhabited and transformed, producing a dense, layered form of urban sociality grounded in coexistence rather than segregation. The idea echoes Iris Young's feminist society in which urban life is structured around difference, allowing groups and individuals to intersect without being rendered homogeneous (1995).

Emil's work highlights how urban transformations are not merely physical but socially and culturally contested, exposing the conditions under which architecture can either

reproduce alienation or facilitate alternative forms of inhabitation, community, and belonging grounded in diverse histories and urban futures. Through her art practice, **dystopian and utopian imaginaries intersect**: oppressive urban conditions are rendered visible, while possibilities for joy, safety, and collective belonging are imagined. Architecture, incorporated into her artworks, functions as a medium for place-making, enabling new forms of urban engagement and critical reflection on political exclusion and spatial inequality.

2.6 Conclusion

By drawing on interviews and visual artworks, this chapter has explored how volunteers navigate and contest gendered spatial power relations through their everyday mobilities and creative engagement, highlighting how these interventions operate as forms of feminist place-making that generate alternative knowledge about the city which is embedded in intimate experiences. Drawing on Doreen Massey's relational understanding of space and Gillian Rose's conceptualization of feminist geographical imagination, and engaging more broadly with South Asian scholarship on gender and space, I have argued that space is not a neutral pre-given reality, but is relationally constructed through ongoing processes of meaning-making. As such, it emerges as a contested terrain shaped by power relations, hierarchies, moral regulation, and regimes of visibilities that structure women's access and experience of the city. Foregrounding spatial practices in this analysis underscores how space is a central political dimension in volunteers' life trajectories. Space impacts not only their participation in political work, but the experiences of growing up in controlled homes and surveilled neighborhoods, their possibilities of attending certain schools, of negotiating their free time or accessing the job market, and their border engagement with the city.

Throughout the analysis, women's spatial practices emerge as contingent, fragmented and continuously negotiated: normative societal frameworks, reflecting the spatial segregation embedded in socio-political fabric, function as moral-spatial dispositif regulating women's mobility, presence and legitimacy in public space, by deploying discourses of respectability and honour. While volunteers, mostly in their early and late

twenties, generally experience increasing mobility in the city (through school, job), this autonomy remains conditional and strongly mediated through ongoing negotiations within familial and society. Simultaneously, mobility in public spaces exposes women to pervasive forms of harassment which operate as disciplinary practices that constrain, disrupt and reconfigure their possibilities of navigating the city. In particular, fear of gendered violence, whether personally experienced or circulating within overwhelming narratives and media reports, emerges as a crucial element profoundly shaping their trajectories, leading women to build mental maps of the city along axes of safety and risk.

The chapter has also investigated the dynamics of women navigating the public space, complicating conventional notions of urban flow historically associated with the figure of the *Lahori flaneur* (a figure that emerged during white Englishmen colonial times and reproduced in later accounts of privileged middle class Punjabi men). Volunteers' trajectories, far from being smooth, are constantly disrupted by experiences of harassment in public spaces. In this context, I have focused particularly on how staring operates as a form of everyday micro-violence, constantly disciplining women's presence in the city, affecting their sense of safety and producing hypervigilance, anxiety, and unease. By engaging with two artworks created by women artists, these experiences of harassment are transformed into powerful critiques of the male gaze, making visible both the material and psychological dimensions of violence, foregrounding the artists' personal and intimate experiences often invisibilized or dismissed by society.

At the same time, the chapter has emphasized that women's spatial practices are not only restricted by fear and violence, but can be transformative and they extend to active reappropriation and claiming of the city. Leisure functions as a practice through which women carve personal space of exploration, self-expression, pleasure amidst restrictions and limited time claimed by productive and reproductive roles. Parks and gardens, occupying a central space in the city's historical landscape, are central spots in which women seek spaces to breathe and cultivate their personal interests. Similarly, collective practices of loitering emerge as central acts of claim to the city, in which

friendship, often forged through participation in the *Aurat March*, becomes a crucial infrastructure enabling women to access, explore, and enjoy the city and feel safe.

Aurat March Lahore 2023 poster, created by two volunteer childhood friends, becomes a site to reimagine the city as a collage and layering of intimate memories and desired visions of alternative feminist futures of inhabiting Lahore. By foregrounding personal, detailed gazes of the urban fabric, their work articulates a different cartography of Lahore, centering women's experiences, and which replaces the military nationalistic landmarks of belonging with landscapes foregrounding heritage, cultural and natural elements of the city. In this sense, the poster shows how art functions as a medium through which different relations with the city, grounded in affective and emotional bonds, offer alternative readings, perspectives and imaginaries of inhabitation, mobility and collective presence.

Engaging with broader processes of urban transformation, the chapter has shown how spatial gendered divisions are intensified through contemporary forms of state and market-driven projects and city planning, such as gated communities, commercial hubs, militarized infrastructures and speculative real estate plannings. By exploring Emil's works I looked at how capitalist and surveillance-driven logics shape urban and material landscape, producing fragmentation, social alienation, gendered segregation and consumerist imperatives. Her work, playing on architectural scapes and isometries, imagines alternative utopian possibilities of women communities, exploring utopian articulations of the city where women can freely move, gather, work, be at leisure fearlessly, envisioning cities organized around care, inclusive sustainability rather than surveillance and fear and exclusion.

This analysis has further challenged rigid binary understandings of space, such as public/private, safe/unsafe, local/global, demonstrating instead their fluid, relational and ever-shifting character in which spatial meanings are unstable and contingent. Through visual subversions, affective mappings and utopian imaginaries, the chapter pointed at how art practices unfold as place-making processes, actively producing alternative

geographical knowledge grounded in lived, embodied and emotional experiences that challenge masculinist claims and “neutral” representations of the city.

Through both spatial practices and artistic interventions, volunteers articulate alternative urban futures grounded in inclusivity, collective and feminist imaginaries, where cities can be reimagined beyond fear, exclusion and control, towards forms of urban life rooted in care, safety, friendship and fun. In this sense, their practices do not merely respond to existing power structures but actively participate in reconfiguring the social and spatial fabric of Lahore, demonstrating that place-making is a terrain of possibility, resistance and transformation.

Chapter 3. Celebrating Feminist Voices: Joy, Irreverence and Belonging, from the *dholki* to the Streets

“Aurat March is a political movement and struggle. Our presence on the streets every March 8 is a political act. Our resistance within our homes is political. Our art breathes politics. The issues tied to our bodies are inherently political. Our sorrows carry political weight. Our joy is political.”
(Aurat March Manifesto 2024)

3.1 Introduction

3.1.1 Chapter Outline

While the *Aurat March* has largely been analyzed in media and scholarly works through its enactment in occasion of the International Women’s Day, foregrounding its spectacular and confrontational character (Alam 2021; Haidar and Ahmad 2024; Kamal 2022; Nadeem et al. 2024; Umar 2024; Zaidi 2024; Zubair 2022), far less attention has been paid to how volunteers themselves conceptualize the march and the movement beyond its public performance. In the following chapter, drawing on my fieldwork participation, in particular on conversations, interviews, and the analysis of cultural production, I examine how volunteers frame feminist politics as a form of resistance, drawing attention to the less visible, intimate and ongoing struggles that inform their engagement. Building on Lila Abu-Lughod’s conceptualization of resistance as a **“diagnostic to power”** (1990), this chapter explores how *Aurat March*’s resistance reveals the workings and shifting configurations of power across multiple sites, in both digital and physical spaces. To foreground resistance and the ways in which resistance is articulated in volunteers’ practices, imaginaries, desires and aspirations, broadens the

focus on how feminist politics exceeds the temporal and spatial boundaries of the march. Rather, I argue, it is embedded in the whole process that sustains the march and the movement itself in the way volunteers mobilize, inhabit and navigate digital and physical spaces, cultivate practices of care in the community, and nurture collective togetherness.

The chapter explores the intersections of volunteers' resistance, their emotional and affective practices and cultural production in order to understand how power operates and how it is contested. After an initial **introduction** outlining the key theoretical concepts that inform my analysis, the **second paragraph** introduces the feminist *dholki*, a fundraiser modelled on the traditional Punjabi pre-wedding ritual, which volunteers started in 2022 and which provides the foundation for the analytical threads developed throughout the chapter.

After introducing the *dholki*, the **third paragraph**, titled "Rituals of Ownerships", examines how volunteers foreground and claim joy as a central dimension of their resistance, essential for sustaining and defining their movement. The analysis highlights how the *dholki*, a celebration in which joy is displaced from its original context as a prelude to the wedding, is ritually reclaimed in volunteers' own terms and rearticulated across different contexts, relationships and institutional settings. Drawing on personal reflections from the *dholkis* and several interviews with the volunteers, this section examines how resistance emerges through interconnected processes by which volunteers reappropriate symbols and ritual practices and, in doing so, perform claims to ownership and authority over boundaries and choices, forms of self-definition and desired life-trajectories. In this section, I ask what these practices reveal about the ways patriarchal structures affect women's emotional and affective dimensions. How does framing joy as a form of resistance shed light on the intersections of emotions, individual subjectivities and the identity politics of the movement? What do these practices tell us about the movement's transformations and the changing configurations of power it navigated?

The fourth paragraph, titled "Rewriting *Tappay* and the Politics of Language" examines the rewriting of Punjabi traditional wedding songs (*tappay*) as a site where *Aurat March* volunteers articulate their resistance within culturally embedded and historically

transmitted oral practices. Drawing from interviews with volunteers, the paragraph considers how the process of reclaiming intergenerational *tappay* stated by the group entails negotiating access to linguistic and cultural repertoires, highlighting how engagement with the Punjabi language and local cultural forms is structured across gender, class and ethnic lines. Through the learning, re-writing and rehearsal of the songs in rhymed verse, participants actively explore their relationship with different forms of belonging, while creatively producing new feminist knowledge. By framing their work within this intergenerational, performative and culturally grounded practices, this section foregrounds processes of reworking cultural forms as tools of feminist resistance and intimate, personal explorations.

Paragraph five, titled “Singing to Resist: Mockery and Subversion in Feminist Performance”, turns to mockery as a political practice through which volunteers resist power by subverting and ridiculing it, while expressing emotions often discouraged in public, such as anger, frustration and hostility. Drawing on James Scott’s concept of *infrapolitics* (1990), I draw on selected *tappay* and group discussions at the *dholki* to examine how mockery emerges as a humorous form of dissent that makes legible the way power is sustained, enacted and contested.

In the **last paragraph**, “Resistance in disguise: bringing irreverence in public”, I look at how irreverence is enacted beyond the *dholki*, across the march and digital spaces. Building on the satirical engagement of *Jamā‘at-e-Islāmī* and Maria B, I explore the interplay of resistance and digital censorship within contemporary call-out and memes of political cultures and online campaigns.

Bringing together insights from resistance studies, emotional politics and cultural production, the analysis situates the study of volunteers’ resistance in relation to broader discussions on how power has been conceptualized in the region, particularly with the understanding of censorship (Mazzarella and Kaur 2009). A central question this chapter addresses is: how do volunteers, through culturally embedded practices, negotiate and articulate resistance? What do these practices reveal about the intersections and transformations of structures of power they contest?

3.1.2 Situating Resistance

Scholarship on resistance has sought to move beyond fixed notions of political opposition by examining everyday practices and subjective meanings and by analyzing how resistance is identified, interpreted, and performed within historically situated contexts of intersecting power relations. My argument builds on Lila Abu-Lughod's conceptualization of resistance presented in her seminal ethnographic work on Bedouin Women's practices (1986) and her subsequent critique on the way the concept has been often romanticized and detached from the actors' own meanings (1990). Rather than treating it as inherently emancipatory, Abu-Lughod proposes understanding it as a "diagnostic to power" (48), an analytic lens that focuses on the workings, intersections and shifts of systems of domination. As she argues:

"With the shift in perspective I am advocating, asking not about the status of resistance itself but about what the forms of resistance indicate about the forms of power that they are up against, we are onto new ground. In addition to questions such as whether official ideology is really ever hegemonic or whether cultural or verbal resistance counts as much as other kinds, we can begin to ask what can be learned about power if we take for granted that resistances, of whatever form, signal sites of struggle". (47)

In her ethnographic work, she identifies different "arenas" or "forms" of resistance embedded in women's everyday practice, each of them highlighting different aspects and dimensions of the way gendered oppression works. Resisting marriage, negotiating gendered segregation, quoting and presenting anecdotes and folktales articulating an "irreverent discourse" and poetry are some of the significant nodes that make it possible to understand the mechanisms through which power is sustained and maintained (and possibly disrupted), such as moral sexual code, sets of restrictions and prohibitions. Building on her work, this chapter aims to identify and examine sites in which resistance is articulated, emphasizing both the process through which it is built and performed (experienced) and the narratives through which it is expressed and framed (represented). In doing so, it shows how individual struggles are woven into a collective political project that shapes the community. Following the conceptual insights defined by Abu-Lughod, the analysis centers volunteers' subjective experiences and treats

resistance not just as an act, but as an ongoing process of meaning-making and identity negotiation. In this sense, the analysis focuses not only on *how* women do politics, but also what their acts *mean* to them and to the process through which such practices are framed, represented, and performed.

Abu-Lughod's work is particularly relevant because it highlights the overlapping ways in which multiple systems of domination operate and how resistance negotiates these intersections. In her account, everyday practices illuminate transformations within Bedouin society and its interactions with broader forces, such as state governance and evolving market economies. As she notes, tracing these varied resistances provides a means to disentangle such forms of power and to understand how women navigate and negotiate them: "If the systems of power are multiple, then resisting at one level may catch people up at other levels" (1990, 53). From this perspective, resistance cannot be understood as situating itself outside power structures, but as embedded within them, simultaneously maintaining and contesting different forms of power. Applying her analysis to *Aurat March* volunteers, this study foregrounds how women operate within multiple, shifting and overlapping systems of patriarchal power, encompassing state and legal apparatus, the expansion of social media-mediated political arenas, kinship relations, culturally embedded norms and codes, which they simultaneously inhabit, uphold and negotiate.

Building on this discussion of everyday resistance, **James Scott's** concept of *infrapolitics* (1990) is particularly relevant to my study. Like Abu-Lughod, Scott frames resistance as a practice embedded within power relations, but he foregrounds the analysis of hidden, low-profile practices, describing **infrapolitics** as the disguised resistance of subordinate groups to articulate political critique when open confrontation is not possible. In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990), he attributes central space to what he terms as 'hidden transcripts', consisting of the gestures, discourses and practices through which critique is performed offstage in the form of a veiled cultural struggle operating beneath the surface of formal politics. While Scott's emphasis on hidden transcripts has been applied in many works, my analysis draws on his following argument addressing the way these hidden discourses are negotiated in the public view.

This politics addresses a central argument: much of the political life of subordinate groups is located neither in offstage hidden discourses nor in overt public performances, but rather in the “manifold strategies by which subordinate groups manage to insinuate their resistance, in disguised forms, into the public transcript”, what he terms “politics of disguise and anonymity” (1990, 136). Significantly, his work individuates as core part of this politics strategy, such as gossip, **rumors, songs, euphemisms, jokes, linguistic tricks, anonymity of ritualized forms of expression** which, while occurring within public view, operate through double meanings or forms of concealment to protect the identities of those involved. While *Aurat March*’s politics articulates in opposition to the cultural, social, legal and economic effects of patriarchy as a system of gendered oppression, attending to the micro-sites in which resistance is performed shifts attention to how volunteers are situated at the intersection of multiple, intimate, everyday struggles.

Against this backdrop, Sherry **Ortner**’s work offers an insightful perspective. In her study (1995), she extends the conceptual categories of Lila Abu-Lughod and Scott, criticizing the broader field for its “ethnographic thinness” (1995, 190), which she attributed to a limited engagement with the complexities of resistant groups. In particular, she points at the insufficient analysis of the internal politics of dominated groups and of the singular subjectivities, centering on their desires, fears, intentions and projects. This analytical absence leads, according to the author, to a binary opposition between resisters and dominators, where resistance is a mechanical reaction between two opposite forces. For this reason, Ortner calls for a greater attention to the “local categories of friction and tensions” (177) which operate *within* social groups, attending to the internal diversity of those who engage in resistance practices, exploring the degrees of “ambivalence and ambiguities of resistance” (190) reflecting complex relationships to power structures. As she argues:

*“One can only appreciate the ways in which resistance can be more than opposition, can be truly **creative and transformative**, if one appreciates **the multiplicity of projects** in which social beings are always engaged, and the multiplicity of ways in which those projects feed on and well as collide with one another.” (ibid., 191)*

Ortner's framework offers a lens for analyzing *Aurat March* as a political collective where resistance cannot be reduced to a singular oppositional "project", but is instead negotiated, internally differentiated and expressed in heterogeneous fashions. Her approach underscores the necessity to engage with the group's internal complexity, pointing at volunteers being embedded within intersecting axes, including gender, sexual orientation, class, age and political stance and overlapping power systems. While volunteers converge in collective practices against gendered oppression, these diverse positionalities produce differentiated experiences, meanings and political agencies.

3.1.3 Contentious Emotions and Cultural Regulation

This chapter foregrounds the significance of emotions in shaping and articulating *Aurat March* resistance and negotiating power configurations. As Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta argue in their seminal work *Passionate Politics* (2001), emotions cannot be studied in isolation from social life. In particular, rather than viewing emotions only in connection with the disruption of social order or a certain political everyday *status quo*, emotional investment should be seen as inseparable from the way it upholds it. The decisive role played by emotions in political movements encompasses different aspects and moments, such as when these movements emerge, sustain or dismember, and how emotions offer a lens to read political events, shape motivations, moral commitments and collective identities. In *Emotions, Mobilisations and South Asian Politics* (2016) Amelie Blom and Stephanie Tawa Lama-Rewal situate the study of emotions within the context of power relations, asking what "contentious emotions" reveal about how power works in the context of political mobilizations. This analysis draws attention to questions such as who has the ability and legitimacy to express particular feelings across politicised digital and physical spaces, as well as which emotions are socially authorized or restricted from being expressed, and how. In this sense, foregrounding emotions in the analysis of resistance highlights how the emotional realm is itself a contested and

negotiated domain. It thereby helps to illuminate the mechanisms through which gendered oppression operates by regulating this realm and contesting it.

Finally, my analysis situates the *Aurat March* within contemporary studies of power as exercised through censorship, a practice which has deeply shaped Pakistan's political history. In this context, the concept of **cultural regulation** (Kaur and Mazarella 2009) expands the traditional understanding of censorship, intended as the institutionalized frames of a legalistic discourse and redefining it as a larger spectrum of public cultural interventions, including the structural, cultural and constitutive forms that regulate expression. In their seminal work *Censorship in South Asia: Cultural Regulation from Sedition to Seduction* (2009), the authors point at how censorship cannot be only "a matter of silencing and denial", but needs to be understood as generative, as "a **proliferation of discourses on normative modes** of desiring, of acting, of being in the world" which point to "the performative, the productive and the affective aspects of public culture" (9). This relocates and expands the sites and agents involved in this production and goes beyond official regulatory authorities, such as the Government, the Police, or Censor Boards, looking also at extra-legal and extra-constitutional forces. Expanding the understanding of censorship beyond its conventional boundaries and foregrounding its productive dimension (highlighting how it "routinizes transgression") helps situating volunteers' resistance as a set of practices that engage with extra institutional configurations of power, such as informal forms of surveillance across physical and digital spheres.

Framing *Aurat March*'s resistance within broader configurations of power, shaped by affective politics and an expanded notion of cultural regulation allows to explore how volunteers negotiate, contest and rework cultural forms as sites of political engagement. In this perspective, these practices are not merely symbolic acts, but embodied and strategic interventions through which power is confronted, challenged and made visible.

3.2 A Feminist *Dholki* (Ethnographic Vignette)

The evening before the *dholki*, a volunteer wrote in the Whatsapp group chat wishing the community *Happy dholki ki Chānd Rāt*⁵¹, the traditional Eid-eve salutation:

*"Happy dholki ki chand raat to all my beautiful pyaris [dear]
some clicks from previous dholki (photos)
Just because my junooni muhabbat [love] for Aurat March
I am so happy and blessed to be a part of this community
Love you saheliyon [friends]"*

As the wish suggested, the following day the *dholki* emerged as a ritual space that volunteers had turned into a celebration on their own terms. Unlike traditional *dholkis*, which are typically held at night, the fundraiser event began in the early afternoon, a time when women could more easily travel, or were permitted to do so by their family. While *dholkis* are conventionally centered on women within domestic settings, the *Aurat March* one took place in a middle and upper middle class student-queer friendly space in the heart of a lower middle class neighbourhood of Lahore, and was opened to women and queer participants. The exclusion of cisgender men alone (stags) was intentional, aimed at creating a space in which participants could move, dance and express themselves freely, without any fear of harassment, surveillance or judgement. The venue was hidden in a narrow lane, opening into a small, colorful, internal courtyard with plants, lots of books (the place hosted a small library) and a big frame of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, the famous *qawālī* singer. The floor was covered with old local carpets and cushions to sit on. As we arrived, few volunteers began to prepare the open space, a task that, in conventional wedding settings, would typically be assigned to the bride's close relatives, sisters and cousins. I was in charge of documenting videos and photos, a task which also provided me the opportunity to ask some questions and socialize. Some volunteers hung *mālās* (flower garlands) along the walls, while others arranged *thalis*, traditional trays holding small sets of plates on which petals and garlands of roses and jasmines were placed. Baskets that would usually contain gifts for the bride were here filled with *mehndī* cones and flower bracelets, the *gajrays* (Figure 14).

⁵¹ "*Happy dholki 's Moon Night*". *Chānd ki Rāt*, (literally: "Night of the Moon") marks the end of a significant festival or auspicious occasion, like the Eid Festival (*Chānd Rāt Mubārak*), when the new moon is sighted and communities gather and get ready to celebrate.

During the set up, one volunteer suggested playing a pre-made Spotify “*shādī* playlist” that blended old and new songs. Nazia Hassan’s voice soon filled the courtyard with a melodious tone, expressing love, melancholic desire and pleasure: “*Tu milā milā sahāra / Bin tere nahīn guzāra / Roz naye sapne dikhānewāle*”⁵². Her groundbreaking pop melodies, widely celebrated across the 1970s, were later banned by Zia-UI-Haq, a restriction that shaped the nostalgic resonance of her songs, which carry lightness, hope and celebration of love. That year, as the following too, her music was used to announce the *dholki* on social media⁵³, featuring *Dosti* and its joyful refrain celebrating friendship: “*Hai tere liye, mere liye, sabke liye, dosti! Ho har jagah aisī dosti!*”⁵⁴



Fig.14 Details from the setting up from *Aurat March Feminist Dholki* 2023. Volunteers prepare the thālīs with the *mehndī* cones and the rose petals, while hanging mālas on the walls and setting the floor carpet where participants would sit on to sing. Source: Photos of the author. March 04, 2023.

⁵² “You met me, you became my support / without you, life does not move forward / you are the one who shows me new dreams every day.”

PS César, “BOOM BOOM - NAZIA HASSAN (1982),” YouTube video, 3:47, July 13, 2016

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jlGK3SDRu2o&list=RDjlGK3SDRu2o&start_radio=1

⁵³ *Aurat March, Feminist dholki*, 2 March 2023; <https://www.instagram.com/p/CpR-SFdLlh4/>; *Aurat March, Feminist dholki Fundraiser*, 26 February 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/C30EM8vJ_7S/

⁵⁴ “It is for you, for me, or everyone, friendship! May such friendship exist everywhere!”

AK Classic Channel, “Teri Meri Aisi Dosti | Dosti | HQ | Nazia & Zoheb Hassan | Aap Ke Liye | Complete | 1987 | PTV,” YouTube video, 3:06, August 3, 2024,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DHnl-J54ael&list=RDDHnl-J54ael&start_radio=1

When the local hand drum, the *dholak*, was brought into the space, a volunteer sitting next to me suggested checking a youtube tutorial on how to play it. Among the younger participants, particularly those in their early 20s, knowing how to play the dholak was uncommon, a skill typically associated with older women more familiar with these types of settings. When an older woman entered the room and began playing *Chitta Kukkar*, the best known punjabi *dholki* rhyme, or *tappa*, the scene shifted as participants joined loudly starting with the opening verses: “*Chitta kukkar baneray te, apna haq mangan waliye, jag oukha tere te*”⁵⁵. As more participants joined the circle, the rhythm and atmosphere warmed up and people began singing and clapping joyously. In the days leading up to the event, volunteers, with the help of their families, had rewritten the *tappay*, sharing them in the group chat (Figure 15). Traditionally used to playfully tease newly formed wedding relations, the lyrics were reworked maintaining the underlying tone of humor and sarcasm, but redirecting it toward patriarchal norms, asserting women’s rights and targeting specific individuals who had been attacking the marchers in the past years. These people, mainly media, religious and political actors, had often been also mocked in other situations, through art installations at the marches, as well as through digital creations, such as reels and memes in the digital space.

The singing also emphasized the unfamiliarity of some of the volunteers with the *tappay* that were sung, due to the class-based gap reflected in the linguistic difficulties and the limited exposure to such cultural gatherings. During the rehearsals, in fact, some volunteers raised questions about the structure or some meanings of the verses. Even among those who had previously attended *dholkis*, few had actively sung or learned these kinds of songs. As the songs went on, a volunteer distributed printed sheets with the lyrics of the songs, so as to facilitate their singing. The songs were not only met with laughter, but also prompted a few moments of reflection. For instance, when revised lyrics of the *tappa Chitta Kukkar*, addressing the ways in which parents often perpetuate gendered oppression through marriage, some volunteers commented on a reading they had come across, noting that many women signed their marriage contract, the *nikāḥ-nāma*, without being made fully aware of their rights. More participants entered the space wearing festive clothes, colorful *shalwār kamīz* and *saris*, as well as western clothes, accessorized with traditional Punjabi ornaments such as *jhumkay* (earrings) and *khussay* (punjabi shoes), along with glitters and make up. Sometimes they would get up from the circle, getting some drinks and food, such as pizza, muffins and other cakes that had been prepared by

⁵⁵ “*There is a rooster on the parapet / Oh you who demand your rights / the world is harsh on you*”

volunteers or bought from some nearby bakeries, and that were sold there to raise donations for the approaching march. As the *dholki* was playing, some volunteers distributed and wore *gajray*, while others sitting next to me enjoyed decorating each other's hands writing the *Aurat March* slogan *Merā jism merī marzī* (my body, my choice)..



Fig. 15: Sequence from the *Aurat March Feminist Dholki* 2023, showing participants writing and singing the *tappay*, recording the event, eating, applying *mehndi* and playing the *dholak*. Source: Photos of the author. March 4, 2023.

Suddenly, two volunteers stood up to dance to the rhythms of the songs, drawing many of the other young participants into Punjabi steps in a circle. The atmosphere became vibrant and alive as participants danced in excitement, freely, singing together. This was one of the rare moments in which such uninhibited and joyous expression fully emerged. Later, at the march, circle dances, often performed in the conclusive moment on the notes of closing song *Hum Dekhenge*, were carried out with much greater restraint and rigidity in front of the public. The event gradually ended a few hours later as the hall emptied, when the organizers cleaned the space, counted the donations, and divided the leftovers, ensuring that everyone could get home safely before it grew too dark.

3.3 Resistance as Celebration: Rituals of Ownership

3.3.1 Reclaiming Joy and Friendship

For many volunteers, the festive spirit of the *dholki*, filled with singing, laughter and collective play, gradually became one of the most anticipated parts of the yearly lead-up to the march. Many of them described this atmosphere of fun and celebration as a rare opportunity where women could experience collective happiness beyond the cultural and religious boundaries traditionally set by society. For Nayaab, who proposed the idea of the *dholki* in 2022, it particularly responded to the desire to reclaim joy from its conventional anchoring in wedding rituals. For women like her in their twenties and early thirties, weddings often constitute one of the few socially accepted sites of collective celebration, but also structurally gendered policy. She believed that one of the main reasons her friends and cousins were so enthusiastic about attending weddings was that “they don’t have any avenues to experience joy”. For her, who did not envision marriage as an imminent, or desired, future, the *Aurat March dholki* offered an alternative effective space, where joy could be imagined, shared and reclaimed in their own terms.

*“I really wanted us to reclaim it [dholki] away from the subject of marriage and being able to just celebrate sisterhood (...) I think for me it was just **frustration** with not being able to experience joy in a setting which is not associated with marriages. I was trying to experience it, because I love*

dholki s in general. I love that women get together and sing... But I hate the fact that it is for a marriage! And as someone who isn't really in the institution of marriage in general I think that was important for me... To make that space for other women as well” (Nayaab. June 27, 2023)

By resituating the *dholki* outside the context of marriage, Nayaab emphasizes the political act of claiming joy as something women are entitled to beyond heterosexual union, respectability and family approval. In this sense, “making space for other women” becomes a practice of resistance, through which an individual desire for joy is transformed into a collective practice of **affirmation and sisterhood** that challenges the terms under which women are expected to gather, celebrate and belong. Placing joy at the center of this reclamation reveals how power may operate not only through formal structures, but also through the shaping of emotional life and by emotional regulation. Gendered normative patterns of behaviour do not only discipline women through laws or institutions, but through affective expectations that determine how women should feel, when and where joy is permissible and which joy is legitimate. From this vantage point, attending to joy brings into view the intimate ways, norms, duties, and social expectations that come to inhabit and shape desires, aspirations and internalized obligations. During the *dholki*, volunteers not only reclaimed joy, but most significantly resituated it against the specific power configurations they opposed.

Reading through Abu-Lughod’s perspective, applying *mehndi* or tying *gajrays* become sites of resistance precisely because they make visible the emotional, normative and cultural regimes they negotiate and resignify. By not writing the name of the groom, participants reworked *mehndi* as a gesture centering the celebration of womanhood itself, becoming evident in slogans such as *Aurat March Mubārak* (Happy Women’s Day), or *Aurat Azād, Samāj Azād*” (Free Woman, Free Society). These slogans celebrated women's existence, autonomy and political struggle, detaching women's value from the bond of marriage and resituating it within feminist resistance and collective politics. The slogans written with the *mehndi* also marked their evolving politics and feminist solidarity, reflecting each year’s march theme (Figure 16). For example, *Aṣal Inṣāf* (Right Justice) in 2022, while in 2025, when the march theme was “Politics, Resistance, Liberation” some of them wrote “*Jin, Jiyān, Azādī*” (Women, Life, Liberation) expressing support to the women resisting in Iran. In this sense, *dholki*

turned into a space where feminist politics was symbolically actively performed, and where joy was not only reclaimed, but politically redirected away from cultural and social norms toward expressions of their resistance.



Fig. 16: Details of the mehndi applications at the *Aurat March Dholki* (2022, 2024). Source: Photos by the author.

3.3.2 Spaces of friendships and healing

In the feminist *dholki*, friendship was also reclaimed as central to *Aurat March*'s politics and to the process of community-building. Through the exchange of *gajray*, applying of *mehndi* on their hands with slogans such as *Sab se pyara, behenchara* ("The most loving, sisterhood") volunteers symbolically transformed ritual gestures into a vivid celebration of friendship, an intimate bond of mutual recognition. The term ***behenchara***, sisterhood, pointed at the political dimension of this relationship, framing friendship as a form of collective solidarity characterized by mutual care, trust and support within their shared struggle. Tia, like Nayaab, had been volunteering with *Aurat March* for a few years but, unlike her, she had been an active participant of *dholkis* in her family. When she took up playing the *dholak* in the feminist event, she explained to me that her *phuppo* (paternal aunt) had taught her, and that she had been playing since she was young. As much as she was a fan of traditional gatherings, which she loved for the way "they bond immediately people together", she found the relationship and the joy

expressed at the *dhholki* and cultivated in *Aurat March* a unique feature of their movement (Figure 17). As she told me:

"I think that within the march it is very important to introduce a feeling of happiness because it is a very emotionally depressing fight.. And resistance, and effort. The difference between the march and other social movements is necessarily is that not only forms connections and the day of the march isn't I believe now what is more important anymore, it is the connections that form before it, it is the network that you form, the 'hey can you help me with this woman I found who is struggling or this person who did this'.. Or 'hey do you wanna celebrate Eid together!' Making friends! A lot of women are unable to make friends of their mental size.. You know!" (Tia, June 22, 2024)

In her view, the friendships formed through *Aurat March* constituted a form of affective capital, providing emotional resources that sustained not only the march itself, but most of her everyday life. In this sense, sisterhood represents a core element of the community, bringing together women sharing similar hopes and visions for the future, transforming intimacy into a site of political belonging. Friendship operates spatially, generating connections that enable women to disrupt the difficulties of reaching out and knowing each other: "A lot of women struggle in isolation because patriarchy necessarily makes women really really isolated... Or within other groups of other women who are patriarchally influenced *bahut zyādā* [very much]. When you *introduce* joy in a community, bind together a lot of like-minded people, and they find companions and comrades within them" (Tia, June 22, 2024). In her view, sisterhood is projective, serving to prefigure the society they envision: one in which "like-minded" friends, "companions and comrades" navigate shared struggles and cultivate mutual care.

For Minal, too, the bonds cultivated within *Aurat March* differed from those she had experienced in other forms of political organizing in Lahore. A 25-year-old Shia Muslim, she had been politically active since the university years, when she was first introduced to Marxist thought and feminist circles, and became familiar with the struggles faced by students coming from Pakistan's peripheral regions, particularly Pashtuns and Baloch women. Over the years, she became involved in various student-led initiatives focused on urban politics, marginality, health, and climate issues. Reflecting on her journey with *Aurat March*, she explained: "There is a sense of solidarity even if something is not understood, *we are sisters!* There is this culture of care and support there. We are just there for each other anytime!" (Minal, October 10, 2024). Minal had attended the first

Aurat March dholki in 2022, but she had not been able to fully join the collective because her family had discovered her earlier involvement in it, and had prevented her from taking part in the *Aurat March* since 2019, subjecting her to close surveillance and scrutiny. Yet, the friendships she formed kept her connected to the movement during the years she could not actively participate, until she rejoined the group of volunteers in 2024 after moving out from her parents' house and gaining greater independence. As she recalled: "Because everybody cared for me, they realized that I couldn't do more. In 2020-2021 there were people who used to march for me, they used to write my name in charts. They used to chant slogans: *Minal ka nāra, azādi!*' They would include me. That is what has kept me up with *Aurat March*" (Minal, October 10, 2024).



Fig.17: Sequence from *Aurat March Dholki* 2023. Volunteers started dancing together, clapping and singing the tappay while mocking various people and aspects of gendered oppression. Source: Photos - and drawing - of the author. March, 4, 2023

Joy, both felt and expressed (or as Tia puts it, “introduced” during the gatherings), was central to the production and articulation of these forms of intimate belonging. The fact that friendship was reclaimed at the *dholki*, a space traditionally devoted to the celebration of marital bonds, is particularly significant, as it underscores how this reclamation took place in opposition to patriarchal structures that assign unequal value and hierarchical importance to relationships, especially those involving women. Cultural

critic and creator Sabahat Zakariya argued that female friendship is accorded a certain degree of importance until women get married, after which society sidelines it in favour of relationships and institutions it considers more important, such as marriage and family (Zakariya, January 14, 2023). In a world structured by patriarchal hierarchies that sustain their power through polarization and division, *behenchara* (sisterhood) foregrounds friendship as a core element of adulthood. In this perspective, friendship emerges as a political act, as an “act of rebellion” standing against “heteronormativity, capitalism, reproductive labour, and domesticity” (Kern 2021,74): it claims an informal and unstructured context, without formal or legal bounds, which is not recognized and not controlled by the state, and to a certain extent by family or society. In a society where women are expected to fulfill gendered reproductive roles, for volunteers like Tia, friendship constitutes a support system which resists patriarchal structures.

Even for volunteers like Farwa, who had attended the *Aurat March* intermittently without creating particularly strong bonds within the collective, the *dholki* functioned as a space of healing through togetherness, joy and fun. Farwa had grown up in a smaller city in Punjab, within a violent family environment marked by emotional manipulation, toxicity, and coercion. At the time of our interview, she was keeping much of her life hidden from her family, from which she had escaped, including her participation in the *Aurat March*. After managing to leave her family and moving to Lahore in search of safety, she had come to know *Aurat March*, which over time had represented a safe and queer-friendly space and community where she could hang out without fear of being herself. For Farwa, who had been experiencing periods of depression and anxiety that kept her from attending the group regularly, the *dholki* became a sudden opportunity to feel better. As she recalled:

“This time I could not come to the meetings, last year I did. Was there also an online meeting... I showed up for the dholki , I wanted to be a part of that. I messaged H. a part of weeks before, she added me to the volunteering team. And that too because M. called me in the morning, I was so depressed. I forced myself to get out to have a nice place to connect to people and have a nice time.. And feel good.” (Farwa, March 21, 2023)

Having endured a forced and violent marriage from which she had managed to escape, Farwa had for long been associating wedding-related events with discomfort, distress and emotional triggers. Yet, the *dholki* offered a different experience. When I visited her at her place in a peripheral upper-middle-class area of Lahore, we watched and discussed the videos I had recorded during the gathering, and she became visibly excited. In one footage, she stood at the center of the circle, spinning and dancing, moments that she had also repeated on the day of the march, in front of the media and a big audience. Reflecting on this contrast, she explained:

“On other shadi events I am always just triggered and have very depressing thoughts. But this is the sort of shadi-ish event where I am feeling empowered. And literally celebrating what they are celebrating.. It is about women empowerment, na? My idea of shadi was like ‘my life is going to be over... because that is how I always imagined it to be right. Because that is what I imagined in my immediate surroundings...And how it was” (Farwa, March 21, 2023)

For Farwa, the event provided a sense of safety in which vulnerability could be expressed and she did not have to perform a certain model of gender, personality or femininity, something that is heavily policed in family settings. Mutual recognition and shared joy could emerge spontaneously within a nurturing and protected environment. Singing *tappay* and dancing were described by her as “powerful” moments and the *dholki* a moment of self-assertion and strength: “this is the only *dholki* that I liked... because this really makes me feel empowered” (Farwa, March 21, 2023).

Taken together, these practices underscore how gendered power structures operate across normative regulations, shaping women’s lives, choices and relationships. They are enacted through an affective regime that governs emotions, pleasures and relational obligations. The resignification of the *dholki* makes this affective infrastructure visible, unsettling dominant scripts of joy (who is permitted to feel it, express it and where), while volunteers resituate relationships and meanings on their own terms. In doing so, joy emerges as a terrain of political struggle. Rather than through overt confrontation, the *dholki* functioned as an effective **low-profile form of resistance**, pointing at gendered domination while contesting it by reinscribing practices with new meanings. As reflected in the experiences of Nayaab, Tia, Minal and Farwa, creating space has been central to enable forms of mutual care and collective healing. For them and many

other volunteers, the very possibility of experiencing joy by singing freely, dancing, and being loud made the *dholki* its most compelling feature: a space where they could be themselves and safe, without being surveilled and morally policed. As another volunteer put it, the event “nurtures a lot of wounds” (Areeba, July 21, 2023), bringing women together within a general absence of spaces where such feelings could be collectively experienced. As bell hooks argued (1989), feminism undoes the separation of the individual from others by highlighting the ways affects and social structures such as gendered oppression are connected, revealing how emotions and politics are intertwined. While anger is necessary, in her view, in articulating pain into collective work, I argue that joy similarly turns pain into a nurturing space for collective care.

3.3.3 “Āj Hamārī ‘īd Hai”: Resistance as Celebration

The joyous atmosphere of the *dholki* resurfaced during the march, which, although it was also experienced as a moment of public confrontation and potential danger, mainly due to media harassment and public backlash, it was repeatedly painted by the volunteers as an **experience of celebration, togetherness and emotional release**. I argue that the *dholki* and the march form part of the same affective landscape, where joy was experienced across private gatherings and public demonstrations. This consideration emerged in numerous comments of the volunteers. As Hadiqa, one of the main organizers told me:

“I think for me personally... I was just like, you know what...The bad part and violence and the stress and tension is going to be there. I just need to focus consciously on enjoying bits of it which is why on the day of the dholki I was so centered I am taking no job work and just going to enjoy it because I want to do that on the march itself! And since 2019 just dancing when the march has ended is one of my fav highlights so I was like I am going to enjoy that.. To the hilts!” (Hadiqa. April 27, 2023)

I contend that the introduction of the feminist *dholki* in 2022 situated the *March* within a more **ritualized register**, in which joy was not peripheral but it was collectively cultivated and actively made room for participants through shared practices. Through practices such as dance and songs, the *dholki* generated (or introduced, as Tia pointed out) an affective space that was experienced later in the march, where joy was both

claimed explicitly, through speeches and slogans, and imagined and experienced. This festive atmosphere increasingly shaped the march not only as a political demonstration, but increasingly also as a cultural celebration of feminist resistance shaped by ritual forms associated with festivity. This ritualization could be seen in the buildup of the march, for instance in the way volunteers **exchanged greetings as wishes** the night before and on the day of the celebration:

*Nayaab: **AM kee chand raat mubarik everyone** ❤️ [Happy Moon Night of Aurat March]
[20:35, 7/3/2024] Dua: I had a very shitty day at work and was feeling unwell so I didn't come.
Want to conserve energy for tomorrow! See you all!!!! Aurat march Mubarak to all you!!! 🌙
[Happy Women's Day to all of you]
[07:44, 8/3/2024] Volunteer: I won't be able to show up today because had a little accident. Really hate missing AM this year. **I really hope everything goes well and March Mubarak everyone!!***
🌸🌸🌸🌸🌸❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️⁵⁶

As she mentioned in the chat, Dua was excited about the march despite having had limited time for preparations, mostly due to her full-time work as a journalist, which particularly in the previous years had at times kept her at a distance from more active involvement in the group. Now in her late twenties, Dua had spent her childhood moving across different cities of Punjab following her father's job before eventually settling in Lahore, where she attended private educational institutions, actively and successfully participating in various school activities. Her decision to speak out during #me too wave in Pakistan, sharing her experiences of harassment and sexism, led her to encounter other women who, like her, refused to retreat in the face of social backlash and sought ways to collectively reclaim their narratives. These same women would have later become her close friends and comrades, with whom she began organizing the *Aurat March* in Lahore. When we scheduled our online call, some months after the march, she recounted the way every year she would use one of the photos from the *dholki*, turned into a colorful artwork, to send wishes. The image represented a fist adorned with the *gajra*, the flower bracelet exchanged in these and other celebratory moments, with the palm decorated with the wish *Aurat March Mubārak* (Figure 18).

⁵⁶ Whatsapp Group Chat 7/3/2024



Fig. 18. *Aurat March* visual. Source: Whatsapp Chat (2023)

“When someone made that artwork where it was mehndi... And it was written Aurat March mubarak.. And I still use it. I still use it on the eve of the march. I sent it to all my contacts... Just like making the gesture... There is a little base of joy... And a lot of it you can find it in the symbolism we were using... In the cultural... In the ownership that we were taking.” (Dua, August 5, 2024)

In 2023 Dua was also in charge of moderating the event standing on the truck, occasionally addressing the audience and chanting slogans about women. At a certain point, as songs and *tappay* were being played on the *dholak*, she addressed the audience mainly composed of women shouting: “beheno, tālī bajāo! āj hamārī ‘īd hai!” (Sisters, clap your hands! Today is our *Eid*!). Later, in the interview, she recalled this moment and explained:

“It is a religious festival, but it is a festival. But Eid for most of us is very hostile.. it is different! is very patriarchal! This was like a feminist Eid. So we started looking at Aurat March not as a... like a very different protest... And then the line up, the music, the way we would structure... I think that was setting the ground for where the march is now.” (Dua, August 5, 2024)

Conceiving the march as a feminist *Eid* was not simply reflected in the way the event was built through performances, music, and songs, but most significantly in the way volunteers **anticipated, prepared for, and framed it**, reproducing even more strongly the rituals and excitement of some local celebrations. As she recounted:

“We would always look up to ‘oh we worked hard for putting it together, now is the time, it is the day when we gather fruits of it!’ And then we would dress up. We would discuss our best clothes. And

*someone would say I wear churiya, oh will bring jhumkay, I will wear jhumkay, those were the ideas .. and the fact that **Aj actually went to Le** and said 'Oh before the march can you put my eyeliner on'..Because you know, it is like you dressing up for it. Something, whatever it is, a head band! A little resistance... there was a certain pride that we took in our friendship. From the fact that we were not scared of our femininity. It was a day of expression, it was a day of open expression, it was a day of visibility" (Dua, August 5, 2024)*

With the same women in whom she had found support years earlier during the #MeToo movement, the rituals of dressing up together, selecting jewelry, and collectively preparing for the march emerge from her words as enactments of shared pride and solidarity where friendship, care, and performance of femininity become acts of resistance against normative constraints. In this way, personal expression, through clothing, adornment, and embodied gestures, become a political terrain where visibility is collectively negotiated and reclaimed. As Dua clearly states, the “fruits” of their work extend beyond the formal demands articulated every year in their manifesto, in the press conference preceding the event, and on the stage itself. Rather, these fruits encompass the possibility to bring in the public sphere a broader affective dimension, made of contrasting emotions, hopes and aspirations articulated over the preceding months, made tangible and experienced through the march. Also for Iqra joy was inseparable from the work of **preparing for the march**, which emerged as the central aspect for her, in the way it offered tangible rewards which made her volunteering meaningful:

"I don't remember who it was but one of the people hosting the stage said that even a moment of joy for a woman is resistance (...) 'cause everything else is supposed to make you feel miserable and if you are joyful in that moment that is resistant. So that really stuck with me.. I feel like the reason why the pre-march activity was rewarding was because it felt very productive and we were actively doing things to get to an end point! And that end point was coming and we were excited to see that end point. I know this is a long term movement and it will take years and years to see any fruitful change... But the days before the march felt rewarding because everyday you come up with some kind of fruitful outcome!" (Iqra. July 10, 2023)

In her words, the process of organizing and celebrating the day embodied resistance: it asserted presence, cultivated agency, and affirmed collective possibility even in the face of systemic oppression.

3.3.4 “We are there too”: Contesting Visibility, Asserting Womanhood

For many volunteers, centering the expression of collective joy was described as a deliberate and necessary act which became part of the identity of the group in response to the increasing backlash to which they were subjected, both as a movement and individually. As this intensified, ranging from criticisms of immodesty or being un-islamic to attempts to ban the march with accusations of blasphemy, the need to celebrate, dance, and express themselves publicly became more crucial, using joy as a form of assertion. Dua, reflecting on the harsh backlash they faced as a group, argued:

*“It was on the thing like ‘why are you wearing earrings to the march? What protest is that?’ I think that also made us reflect... And understand as well... Were they bothered by this as well? So there was something that we were doing as women... Initially I think a lot of us weren’t doing it for the activism of it, or for the optics of it... But... It was part of our womanhood! Wear a few churians sometimes! But when we did it at the protest (...) When they saw women who were looking very different... That was a problem! Like that, what do you mean? You are not supposed to protest like this! And then we started defending it... And then we started wearing the things.. Or doing the things... Because... (she pauses) we realized that... there is value to this as well and our existence... And then I started saying out loud that well joy is resistance! **Because it is something that you wanna teach them!** Because many people I feel that they don’t understand this because they don’t know because they think what kind of protest is that? You are dancing and laughing, and just nach-gana and that’s it!” (Dua, August 5, 2024)*

Performing womanhood on their own terms, through specific clothes and jewellery, by dancing and singing became a way for participants like Dua to assert how women ought to occupy public spaces traditionally inhabited and purposed for men’s gatherings. Their choices highlighted that political gatherings are culturally scripted and policed according to male-defined norms of seriousness, anger and, for women, "appropriate" behaviour and decorum. Ikram, Kour and Kalyan argued that religious nationalism and moral populism, promoted by religious pressure groups like *Tehrīk-e-Labbaik Pākistān* (TLP) and *Tehrīk-e-Talibān Pākistān* (TTP), have played a major role in recasting womanhood in Punjabi as a site of morality and surveillance, by “reordering of cultural capital, symbolic authority and gender visibility within Punjab.” (2025, 998). Under this new “politics of visibility” (Chaudhry 2022) regulating presence in public Punjabi life, the authors argue that women have been increasingly valorized for moral integrity while

being stripped of a creative sensibility which has been central to Punjab cultural expression. Volunteers, in this sense, reject these imposed definitions by reclaiming and revitalizing cultural modes and spaces of expression, of womanhood and of public visibility on their own terms. Their choice to appear in a certain way becomes an intentional strategy to resist patriarchal ways and attempts to control the way women demonstrate (“why are you wearing earrings? what kind of protest is that?”) shows how domination emerges as a form of surveillance on the political significance of the presence of women in the public space. In Dua’s words, their being judged as improper, frivolous, or dangerous because of their joy, is turned into an assertion of resistance (“and then I started saying out loud that well, joy is resistance!”) against how patriarchy and male authority regulate women’s access to joy and delimit how it should be experienced especially in the public sphere.

For Mahira, another active volunteer, this form of male control is deeply evident in the repression of spontaneous cultural and artistic expressions within society. As a trainer and education professional, Mahira told me that she saw art a crucial component of her teaching and training practices, a belief that also led her to conceptualize the Tunnel of Harassment, titled “ہمارے قدموں میں چل کے تو دیکھ”⁵⁷, an art piece displayed at *Aurat March* in 2023 and 2024. The installation consisted of a dark tunnel through which participants would walk while surrounded by frightening printed eyes and audio recordings of catcalling and harassment, recreating the unsettling experience of going through public space as a woman. Originally conceived by Mahira as a personal project, the artwork was later installed on a larger scale as a tunnel for the march. Precisely because of the importance she attributed to art as a form of learning and embodied engagement, she was particularly struck by the marginal place accorded to artistic expression in society and by the suspicion often directed towards spontaneous joyful gatherings involving cultural and artistic expression.

⁵⁷ “Try walking in our footsteps and see”.

The tunnel was designed to allow straight men moving through it (particularly participants and media anchors covering the event) to experience what it feels like for women and khwajasiras (and, more broadly, gender minorities) to navigate through spaces shaped by intimidation and harassment.

*“All the forms of art that people want to see and experience ... are censored! I feel ke khush hone pe pabandi hai yahan pe! But you see in smaller pockets! Jaise I **have always viewed Aurat March as a celebration, not as a protest!** It always makes me **emotional** in terms of.. We are here on the street, claiming it, raising their voice to their maximum potential, screaming, shouting, laughing, louder than ever! Which probably is **the most looked down upon form of act from a woman... being loud, being happy!**” (...)* There are so many women coming in the streets, claiming as their own and just voicing... just being... Just... *apni presence show karen ki yeh bhi hamara...hamari jagah hai! And you are here, ok, great but we are there too: see us! So we are there!”* (Mahira, September 13, 2023)

Referring to the derogatory classist commonly used term *mirāsī* or the *nāchne gānewāle* types to describe cultural performers and musicians usually from lower classes, she points to how society has stigmatized practices associated with spontaneous and public dance and music. This not only has delegitimized the performers themselves, but also the joy, energy and effective power their practices produce, signaling that they should not openly take place in the society. In this context, the *Aurat March*’s spontaneous performances expressing loudness, happiness and celebration are similarly policed and discredited, reflecting societal discomfort with women’s spontaneous and embodied expressions of joy. As articulated by Mahira and Dua, joy is not only an emotion for which space must be actively created (“Yeh bhī hamārī jagah hai”), but a political dimension that demands public recognition and acknowledgement (“apnī presence show karen”... “we are there too: see us! we are there!” (Mahira, September 13, 2023). Drawing on Abu-Lughod, **visibility** emerges as a central terrain of contestation in which power is imposed, negotiated and reclaimed. It places women in a position of fragility, exposing them to recognition, scrutiny, and targeting, while simultaneously being claimed as a means of political assertion and public presence in places and modalities from which women are usually excluded. As Dua observed, their presence it is “something that you wanna teach them [the public, mostly men]”, a necessity echoed by Hadiqa: “They [men] need to see this, they need to see women claiming joy and being safe in their own bodies, even if yes especially when they start filming you, it makes you feel a little unsafe” (Hadiqa. April 27, 2023).

In the context of *Aurat March*, visibility emerges as a battleground mediated through moral and cultural frameworks that discipline women’s bodies and behaviours. Nicholas Mirzoeff’s concept of regimes of **visuality** (2011) offers a lens to understand how such

power is systematically organized and sustained. According to him, visibility is not merely about what is seen, but about how seeing itself is structured: it classifies bodies, regulates appearance and defines the norms of public presence. Within this framework, it operates as dominant modes of control and power over women, determining how they can be seen in certain spaces and when bodies are considered acceptable or excessive in public spaces. Following Kaur and Mazarella (2009), power in the forms of censorship and regulation, such as in the case of visibility, is not solely restrictive, but also generative, creating the conditions that allow for the emergence of counter-visual strategies that disrupt dominant ways of seeing. Acts such as asserting joy and womanhood illustrate this potential, stating women's right to appear in their own way and to celebrate and shape their demands on their own terms. By reclaiming joy as a core part of their politics, *Aurat March* points to how collective expression of emotions is regulated and negotiated terrain within power configurations, where celebration and assertion coexist with social scrutiny, backlash and surveillance.

3.4 Reclaiming *Tappay* and Reworking Culture

3.4.1 *Language Politics and Cultural Negotiation*

In 2022, in the launch of its first feminist *Dholki*, the collective situated its feminist praxis within culturally embedded practices and historically transmitted forms of expression. The Instagram post announced:

*“Aurat March’s feminism is always rooted in our **culture** and its **behenchara**. By **reclaiming our intergenerational tappay**, we wholeheartedly **celebrate our resistance to pidarshahi!**”*⁵⁸

The post, similar to the ones of the following years, foregrounded culture as the terrain through which resistance to patriarchy (*pidarshahi*) could be articulated and celebrated through acts of “reclamation” of local songs, *tappay*, transmitted orally by women. The *tappa* is a distinct type of Punjabi folk song, traditionally performed at wedding

⁵⁸ *Aurat March*, ideo of 2022 *dholki* . Instagram. February 27, 2022. https://www.instagram.com/p/CaedoFDrln1/?img_index=1

celebrations and *dholkis* by women of the bride's family in domestic settings. Within this festive setting, these songs employ different linguistic strategies including humour, exaggeration, sarcasm and various metaphors to convey layered meanings about family relationships and conjugal life. Through teasing and remarks on in-law dynamics, marital expectations and desire, *tappay* create a culturally legitimate space for articulating emotions that are usually not publicly expressed.

In the following paragraph, I explore how the feminist *dholki* emerges as an experimental and affective site in which participants, in the process of "reclaiming" *tappay*, actively negotiate their access to Punjabi cultural and linguistic gendered repertoires. For some participants, *Aurat March Dholki* represented the first one, either due to lack of opportunities within their families or a general disinterest in wedding rituals. Others, the majority, had attended these gatherings, and while being familiar with the *tappay* as a genre (primarily through the performances of Musarrat Nazir, who popularized them in the 1970s, rather than through family settings), yet were unfamiliar with the lyrics. Few others had actively participated in these kinds of gatherings, with a couple knowing how to play the *dholak*, and the majority cultivated a strong interest and curiosity within their own family environment. As outlined earlier, unfamiliarity with the Punjabi songs became evident not only in the process of re-writing them, but in participants' hesitation to play the *dholak*, and, in some cases, in the questions about the preparation of the event. These moments pointed to the uneven degrees of familiarity and attachment to language language and cultural practices, highlighting how class had been shaping urban upper-middle class women's access to linguistic and cultural knowledge. Within this context, I ask what does it mean to reclaim shared "intergenerational *tappay*, as asserted by participants? What do these negotiations reveal about their participants' positionings along gendered, classed and ethnic lines? And in what ways is feminism rooted and enacted through cultural practices?

During an early Whatsapp discussion prior to the 2023 *dholki*, volunteers were sharing some *tappay* they had been working on, often consulting their mothers or other female family members. Beyond revealing the challenges of interpreting Punjabi words in the original lyrics, which are rich in metaphors and allusions, the discussion also highlighted

some of the participants' **unfamiliarity** with the cultural contexts and traditional practices these expressions described or implied. After one of the volunteers re-wrote the famous *dholki* song “*Mathe te Chamkān wāl mere banre de*”⁵⁹ (The line - ornament - on the forehead of my groom is shining), replacing the word *banre* - groom - with *behton* - sisters (“*Mathe te Chamkan vaal meri behton de*”) a lively discussion emerged about the original meaning of the verse in Punjabi. What began as a playful reinterpretation quickly became an insightful moment, revealing deeper dynamics in terms of how volunteers understand and relate to Punjabi, filtered through jokes and personal anecdotes.

Participant 1: Correct me if I'm wrong: the first line is supposed to be a diss about a balding man... right? In the original tappa.

Do we need to change it Phir? I'm not sure. Please someone weigh in

Participant 2: Ahahahah

Participant 3: It is? 😏

Participant 4: HAHA OH MY GOD. I had no idea. I'm so bad at punjabi

Participant 3: I thought it just says *dulhay keh baal chamak rahe hain* [the hair of the groom is shining]

Participant 4: Participant 3 is to blame equally she proofread these

Participant 3: Because i've heard this same line for *dulhan* also *mujhe bhi nahi aati punjabi* 🙄 [I don't speak Punjabi either]

Participant 4: Ammi says it doesn't mean balding *wese* but she's not Punjabi either

Participant 3: my ammi says the same - she says its about *jab aap dulhay ke baalon main tail lagatay ho* as part of *rasam*. But idk tbh 😊 [when you apply the oil on the hair of the groom as part of the ritual]

Participant 1: Yaar I'm not sure. I think so, but highly doubting myself.

Liek... why else would *baal* be *chamking* on the forehead? [the hair be shining]

Ohhh ok I would trust ammis [mothers] on this

So ok ignore me

Participant 5: I think it means that he has full head of hair that it also covers his forehead

Participant 1 ... mein opposite soch rahi thi 🤔 [I was thinking the opposite]

Participant 6 weights in explaining how the *tappay* means that the hair of the groom-to-be are shining because of the oil applied on them]

Participant 1: Thanks sis

Hahahaha

Story time: I had a *rishta* meeting⁶⁰ once where the guy, with a receding hairline, who got a little sweaty after having the *chai* snacks.

I don't remember his face only his ugly shoes and his sweaty forehead.

... and that's how this particular tappa is low-key forever ruined for me 😊

⁵⁹ Musarrat Nazir, “Mathay Te Chamkan Waal,” PAK Classic Channel, YouTube, 3:37. January 29, 2022 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A73eX1lDx8I&list=RDA73eX1lDx8I&start_radio=1

⁶⁰ *Rishta* meeting is the traditional arranged meeting where families or couples alone meet to know each other and see the compatibility for a potential marriage proposal

Participant 5: *For me it was that hairstyle men used to have with oil pressed hair curves on forehead*

Participant 7: *Appalling exposé*⁶¹

Nayaab, who proposed to set up the *dholki* in 2022, also took part in this discussion, during which the issues around *tappay* came to the forefront. As she later told me, she had never actively participated in singing or chanting them in traditional settings: this was partially due to her disinterest in the idea of marriage, but also because she felt *distant* to them. For the event she had asked her mother to assist her in re-writing a few of the *tappay*, which, when we gathered some days later, she excitedly began chanting, guiding and motivating the other participants to join in.

"It might be surprising for you because I am very an active participant of the dholkis but I have never participated in any wedding related dholki in my entire life. My mother knows a lot of tappay and I used to just watch her sing, I used just to clap and stuff I never felt connected to them... But just changing the lyrics and the feminist dholki I think I just connect it more, so I just make more of an effort to learn the language and participate as well... But it doesn't come naturally to me at all it is not something I have done for my entire life and I feel that that is a lot of women have become sort of distanced from these indigenous tappay as well and this is a chance I guess for them to re-learn some of those" (Nayaab, June 27, 2023)

The process of writing the *tappay* emerges not merely as a way to "feel connected", but also as an **engagement with her relationship to Punjabi**, a language that she could understand but did not feel confident speaking. According to her, the "chance" women had to "re-learn" *tappay* entailed not only to get closer to old modes of cultural expression, but also a motivation to engage with a language from which she, as many other upper-middle-class urban Punjabi women, had been structurally become unfamiliar with. As a consequence, this process of reconnection led also to a wider sense of participation and engagement ("I make more of an effort to learn the language and participate as well" - Nayaab, June 27, 2023):

"My parents do speak it [Punjabi] but I can understand Punjabi really well but can't speak it as fluently. I mean I can if someone puts a gun on my head I guess but.. I don't usually converse in Punjabi. Which is different from people from Sindh and KPK, Balochistan! They usually speak in their mother tongues a lot!" (Nayaab, June 27, 2023)

⁶¹ *Whatsapp Group Chat 27/2/2023*

For many other volunteers like Nayaab, this process illustrates how feminist politics is both situated within and challenges complex power structures shaped by class, language, and ethnicity. By reclaiming, or as Nayaab describes, re-learning, cultural and linguistic forms, participants exposed and contested hierarchies that have historically limited, by marginalizing it, access to these spaces of knowledge and expression. Punjabi has been socially associated by the upper-class to the one spoken by the lower-class “*paindoo*” (village dweller, deriving from *pind*-village), a label derogatorily used to signify an individual as illiterate, provincial, unsophisticated and socio-economically marginalized. Iqra Shagufta Cheema (2024) has observed that this association marks a shift from framing Punjabi as a language to an **accent** of social and cultural inferiority which stigmatizes its speakers:

“In this usage, paindoo accent becomes a classed, racialized, and gendered object. It becomes just an accent, not a language, and is used to dismiss Punjabi culture and identity. It becomes detached from the speaking subject since Punjabis as a hegemonic group are desired, valued, even valorized but Punjabiyat or Punjabiness is not.” (2024, 2)

As the Cheema later argues, in Pakistan, a country deeply shaped by colonial language politics that have conferred higher status to English and Urdu over regional languages, “**accent indexes belonging** - belonging to un/desired hierarchies of class, intelligence, literacy, consciousness, and culture.” (2024, 3). This led many upper-middle-class Punjabis to regard their language as low-status, in contrast to other parts of Pakistan (or also Indian Punjab) where, as Nayaab noted, regional languages are spoken across classes and are claimed with pride. As Tariq Rahman pointed out (1996), the majority of upper-middle-class Punjabis for a long time showed a sort of “**cultural shame**” towards “their culture in general, and their language in particular” (84). Despite being openly challenged in cultural and activist circles of Punjabi intellectuals since the 1960s, as I could witness with students I encountered during my fieldwork, this belief is still deeply rooted, particularly among aspiring middle-class young women who aim to identify with the intellectual Urdu or world class English speaking world⁶². For many

⁶² This was also evident during my time at Kinnaird College for Women: Punjabi was commonly spoken among hostel residents, mostly coming from smaller Punjabi cities and towns, yet it was also frequently used as a means of mockery, particularly when an accent was considered “excessive” or overly marked.

upper-middle-class *Aurat March* volunteers, most of whom were “ethnically” Punjabis, the language was not well known, as they had grown up in families that favoured Urdu at home and sent their children to English schools (more prominently visible in Gen Z’s volunteers in their early twenties). However, over the course of my fieldwork, songs, *tappay*, and other performances in Punjabi became increasingly more prominent during the marches, as the question of language assumed greater relevance within the movement’s politics and understanding of resistance. Earlier, in fact, Punjabi had been mostly deployed for practical reasons and ends, such as to connect with women from different class backgrounds during outreach activities and programs.

At the same time this process reflects how, in recent years, Punjabi has been increasingly made prominent by the music industry, including women artists and performers (Ikram, Kour, and Kalyan 2025) leading to an important shift. Articulated in modern melodies ranging from sufi pop to rap, Punjabi has become increasingly appealing to urban-middle-class youth who are unfamiliar with the language, reducing the language’s stigmatization. Drawing from Cheema’s vocabulary, Punjabi has shifted from being an undesirable, communicative medium of the *paindoo* to a consumable and desirable expression for the urban youth, particularly in musical and artistic forms.

During my fieldwork, this tension was evident: while Punjabi remained a linguistic obstacle for some women, yet it was simultaneously reclaimed, desired and celebrated in its playful, enjoyable and performative forms. Simultaneously, volunteers like Nayaab saw *dholki* as an important site to engage with Punjabi and master it as part of their feminist vision. In this sense, for many volunteers engaging with Punjabi through *tappay* could be understood as a form of resistance against classed, gendered and ethnic hierarchies that have structured their growth and contributed to feelings of alienation and disconnection from their cultural and linguistic sense of belonging.

3.4.2 *Writing to Belong: Cultivating Feminist Expression*

For volunteers already familiar with Punjabi and its cultural articulations, engagement took a different form. For Areeba, in her early thirties, rewriting *tappay* became a way to cultivate an affective connection with the elder women in her family, particularly her

grandmother and her aunt, and engage with their vast knowledge of Punjabi, in the form of language and music. In the interview, she explained that she had grown up attending weddings and was deeply fascinated and in love with local music and songs, with which she was very familiar. Areeba emphasized to me that she could perfectly understand Punjabi, including many regional variations, even though she struggled to fluently speak it herself. For the *Aurat March*, she decided to experiment writing her own *tappay*, as she told e:

*“For me singing or understanding or writing tappay was something that I always wanted to do, so in this Aurat March dholki when I decided to write tappay... That was my first time doing it. But I was so curious because I had this idea that I wanted to convey... That if we are talking about feminist movements... This is the tappa that we can use. So I started writing. It took me a couple of days to write them but I had that **inspiration** because of my grandmother. I would ask her sometimes that you know how did you.. Even my aunt, that she is very good in tappay and punjabi singing and folklore music so I asked them a couple of times I would **does it sound like cliches but ke ke she was like that it has to come from your heart, it has to be your personal experience... Otherwise you can't really write or enjoy a tappa!** So I thought about my experiences and you know 30 years how much I have grown... What I have been through experiences as a woman, so I started writing based on that and... It turned out that people liked it!” (Areeba, July 21, 2023)*

For Areeba, the feminist *dholki* offered a space where her personal experience as a woman, guided by the instructive practices of her grandmother (“it has to come from your heart, it has to be **your personal experience**, otherwise you can't really write or enjoy a *tappa*”) could be creatively interwoven and expressed as openly political. In the *tappa* she wrote, modeled on “*Lalalalalalalala ho gayi re*”⁶³, pointed at the disruptive character of feminism, described as spring bursting (*aaye feminism di bahaar*).

*“Aurat hui hushiyar, bani hunar di mahar
howey ghar ya sarkar, aaye feminism di bahar
la la la la la ho gayi re baija baija baija baija ho gai re
la la la la la ho gayi re baija baija baija baija ho gai re
Jagg hua parehsan, dekho kurriyon kee shaan
Aurat mangay insaaf, roti kapra makaan.
Pidarshahi ka nizam hai, barra hee beimaan hai*

⁶³ Simran Sharma, “*Lala Lala Lala Ho Gayi Re Punjabi Dance*,” YouTube video, 3:21, December 13, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sAhwOq1WK5o&list=RDsAhwOq1WK5o&start_radio=1

The verses she wrote emphasize her feelings towards *Aurat March*, explaining how feminism had made women like her aware, ready and skilled (“Aurat hui hushiyar, bani hunar di mahar”), with clear demands of justice and basic rights (“Aurat mangay insaaf, roti kapra makaan”) and whose dignity demands recognition (“dekho kurriyon kee shaan”). The lyrics, as mentioned, reflected her personal experience of political awareness and engagement. While working in the public sector on welfare and development campaigns, she became acquainted with *Aurat March*, firstly attending the event in 2019 and later joining as a volunteer. In the *tappa*’s following lines, women’s assertion unsettles patriarchy and capitalism, depicted as broken and corrupted (Pidarshahi ka nizam hai, barra hee beimaan hai / Sarmayakaari da raaj toray, zenanian di shaan ae”). The creative potential inherent in *tappay* (both the singing and composing new verses), as modeled by her elders, turned individual experiences of gendered oppression into collective political resistance, gaining both its power and enjoyment precisely because it resonates with other participants (“it turned out that people liked it!”), just as in the original setting. For Areeba, her work also constituted “a way to honour” **the memory of women of her family**, whose lives inspired and shaped her sense of belonging, reinforcing “a bond” she shared with them across generations. *Tappay* functioned as a living trace of a more ancient heritage too, which crossed political borders. To Areeba, whose family partially originated from Indian Punjab, they offered a site to claim a shared history and cultural memory disrupted by Partition. In this sense, Areeba’s engagement shows how feminist cultural work contests Pakistani dominant, classed, Urdu-centered and religious nationalist narratives of identity, articulating an alternative sense of belonging grounded into transregional and transgenerational affective ties to Punjab and its cultural memory.

⁶⁴ “The woman has become aware, she has mastered her skills
Whether it is the home or the state, the spring of feminism has arrived.
The world has grown uneasy, look at the pride of the girls.
The women demands justice: bread, clothing and shelter
The patriarchal system is extremely dishonest.
The rule of capitalism is broken, women’s pride has emerged.”

The *dholki* was a moment which brought together not only young women, but also senior activists. Wardah, a member of Women's Action Forum Lahore, the platform constituted by the so-called "old guard" of women's activists, actively took part in the event, singing and leading some of the dances by performing traditional steps. During a visit to her home, situated in a quiet residential neighbourhood, she described that *tappay* represented a powerful medium through which women could express their voices while claiming their experiences as messages carried across generations:

*"Yeh [tappay] engage karte logon ko, apnī jānib khīnchte hain tappay aur jo gīte balle balle aur bāqī ke jo gāne hain, inkā jo rhythm hai... voh hamārī naslon da naslon chal rahā hai, generation to generation! Merī ammī ke daur men bhī yeh gīt hote the, mere daur men bhī hote the, aur beṭī ke daur men bhī... Aur ā'inda hī rahenge! Zamīn ke gīten hain. The songs that belong to our... Maṭlab, hamārī zamīn se jore hu'e hain. Abhī abhī zamīn ke gīt hote jo bacche hon sun sunke baṛe hote to woh logon ko apnī jānib khīnchne zyāda hai. Ab ham ne rhythm wahin rakhā... Aur bāt ham ne apne kī uskī!"*⁶⁵ (Wardah. March 18, 2023).

Similarly to Areeba, *tappay* are seen as politically and culturally significant for their being deeply entangled to their land, their region ("*zamīn ke gīten hain, hamārī zamīn se jore hu'e hain*"). According to her, this bond is made visible by how these songs pull people together ("*apnī jānib khīnchte hain*") and foreground the connection existing across generations ("*woh hamārī aslon da naslon chal rahā hain*"). Wardah came to the *dholki* and to the march with her daughter, embodying a tangible moment in which this intergenerational connection was re-established and claimed as central in her feminist view. In her study of North Indian folksongs, Jassal (2012) argued that the repeated performance and intergenerational transmission of folk songs shows the enduring circulation and the degree of social acceptability of the ideas, messages and moods they express. In this sense, the need to rewrite and rework *tappay* in the context of *Aurat March* points to how feminism intervenes in preexisting cultural forms, offering a new lens through which social relations, gendered norms, and structure of power are re-read and resignified. Each year on International Women's Day Wardah would teach

⁶⁵ "These [tappay] engage people and draw them in. These songs, balle balle and the other ones, their rhythms... It has been passed down through generations. During my mother's time, in my time, and now in my daughter's time, and they will continue! These songs belong to our...I mean, they are connected to our land. Songs that now children hear and grow up with, those songs naturally draw people towards them. Now we have preserved that rhythm.... and we have made it our own".

these and other old songs composed within the feminist movement over the decades to her students, believing in their power of conveying a political message:

*“Ham log bahut āsāni ke sāth apnī bāt ko, apni **paighām** ko logon tak pahunchā sakte hain, ham ek ṭarīqā ātā hai, kabhī likhkar kabhī bolkar, kabhī gākar, aur jo singing hotī hai, aisā medium jo ke har daur me har kisī ko apnī jānib pahuncātā hai. Jo gānā ismen barī **ṭāqat** hai.. voh chāhe kisī bhī zamīn, kisī kī zabān ho.. gāne ke andar **khud ṭāqat** hai. (...) Kamla started these tappay in India. Kamla from India, WAF se thī woh aur unhone yeh tappay start kiye the urdū ke andar...”⁶⁶*
(Wardah. March 18, 2023)

Unlike younger participants, Wardah also grounded this creative expression and songwriting as an inherent part of the way earlier generations of feminists had been building their politics. Since the 1980s, women across South Asia had built networks in which they composed and shared songs for one another. In particular, she associated this practice with the works of prominent Indian feminist Kamla Bhasin, who had written songs for the Pakistani women's right movement which were performed at many of its *jalsas*, festivals and congress (Bhasin 2017).

Tappay highlights how cultural forms can serve as sites of belonging, feminist engagement and reclamation, articulating regional, place-based forms of belonging through which volunteers negotiate the class-based alienation that for some has created distance from their families, language and cultural heritage. By challenging nationalist or religious frameworks of identities, the belonging expressed through *tappay* is both inter-generational and rooted in a cultural dimension tied to the land. In this sense, for volunteers “reclaiming the intergenerational *tappay*” reflects **a desire to reconnect, re-learn and actively engage** with these cultural forms through their personal experiences expressed in the feminist *dholki*. For some participants, this engagement emphasized rupture of distance, as in Nayaab’s case; for others, like Areeba, it evoked nostalgia and a desire to participate, strengthening bonds with elder women of her family dear to her. Wardah’s experience, meanwhile, shows how *tappay* are significant for how they foster closeness, continuity, and intergenerational attachment,

⁶⁶“We are able to convey our message to people very easily, through various means—sometimes by writing, sometimes by speaking, sometimes by singing. Singing, in particular, serves as a medium that reaches people in every era. The songs themselves hold great power, regardless of the land or language they come from. (...) Kamla initiated these tappay in India. Kamla, who was associated with WAF, began performing them in Urdu”

demonstrating how these songs, in various forms over time, reenact and re-create a vibrant arena where women share their experiences and struggles. As Irsar and Bibi argued, *tappay* are “a living discourse where anonymity and collective authorship amplify silenced perspectives, especially those of women, while also articulating communal aspirations” (2025, 201). Feminist re-writing built on this gendered discursive tradition rooted in everyday communication and performances among women within Punjabi households, across labour, domestic work and ritual settings, as Areeba nostalgically recalled from her elders. By rewriting the songs, volunteers reconnected to generations of women, articulating the same need to voice their perspectives as it was in traditional contexts, where *tappay* have been “both memory and imagination” (2025, 201).

3.5 Singing to Resist: Mockery and Subversion in Feminist Politics

3.5.1 Songs as Patriarchal Critique

*“Urr urr ke meri zulfein,
Karti nahin ishaare,
Kyun taartay chalay hain,
Mard saare hamaray
Chhup jaayein saari kudiyaan
Ghar mein dar ke maare
Har mor pe khare hain
MashaAllah kehnaay wale”⁶⁷*

During the 2023 *dholki*, the iconic wedding song *Mehndi lagake rakhna*⁶⁸ was performed with great energy and fun. As the volunteers began to sing the familiar melody drew everyone in, but the lyrics had been changed: the celebration of a modest bride and her female companions was turned into a reminder, a sharp commentary on harassment and the dynamics of victim-blaming. In the transformed verses, the women’s flowing hair, originally a symbol of feminine allure and male attention, became object of

⁶⁷ *My hair flies freely/ but they give no sign/ So why are all our men/ falling as they walk?
All the girls will hide/ afraid in their homes / At every street corner there are/ (men) exclaiming ‘MashAllah’ at them!*

⁶⁸ YRF, “Mehndi Laga Ke Rakhna Song | Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge | Shah Rukh Khan, Kajol | Lata, Udit | DDLJ,” YouTube video, 6:42, posted April 23, 2009.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lnpedShlaDs&list=RDlnpedShlaDs&start_radio=1

sarcasm directed at men, as the lyrics questioned the reasons behind men falling for them despite no invitation to do so (*Urr urr ke meri zulfein, Karti nahin ishaare, Kyun taartay chalay hain, Mard saare hamaray?*). Similarly, the trope of women hiding out of shame in the presence of lovers was replaced with the women's experience of avoiding public spaces due to the fear of harassment (*dar ke mare*). This fear was then humorously rescaled, as men standing on street corners (*har mor pe khare hain*) were reduced to their grotesque attempt to attract women's attention (*MashaAllah kehnaay wale*). During the singing, the energy was electric, as volunteers were clapping, laughing and smiling, as their experiences resonated with each other. The song was no longer just a wedding tune, but became a vehicle for feminist critique, irreverent and collective, tuning that space into a site where patriarchy could be laughed at, questioned and subverted. While the previous section examined Punjabi wedding songs in relation to how volunteers articulate their positionings to linguistic and cultural forms, the following paragraphs examine how these songs facilitate the expression of underlying emotions and the articulation of a feminist discourse. In this sense, wedding songs do not only channel collective affects, but also illuminate the power structures they challenge.

In line with Abu-Lughod's ethnographic analysis of oral poetry (1986) and Smita Jassal's study of folksongs (2012), wedding songs can be understood as important communicative mediums through which inner emotions that normally are silenced in everyday conversations are expressed. In Abu-Lughod's work, **oral poetry** did not simply represent a way to communicate, but a **subversive discourse** allowing people to resist a moral code through which unequal structures of power were perpetuated in the society. Through this discourse, simultaneously "on sentiments" and "of defiance" (1986, 185), individuals in Bedouin society were able to express emotions that were excluded from everyday social interactions, such as vulnerability and love, as ordinary communication was shaped by modesty and honor. As Abu-Lughod explained, "poetry carries the sentiments that violate this code, the vulnerability to others that is ordinarily a sign of dishonorable lack of autonomy and the romantic love that is considered immoral and immodest" (*Ibid.*, 47).

Punjabi *tappay* can be situated within this framework: in their original context, orally performed by women in the domestic settings and social gatherings, both everyday life and in ritual occasions such as the *dholki*, these songs articulate underlying emotions and aspects considered "private", that would normally be considered controversial if expressed openly. In the context of the *dholki*, they resurface in liminal moments, such as the pre-wedding ritual, when societal norms are temporarily suspended and hidden emotional tensions are brought into light, before usual social order is re-established. Syeda Zaidi (2016) argued that, unlike other wedding songs explicitly upholding patriarchal gender roles (such as marriage as the fulfillment of the girls' dream, or femininity as submissive contraposed to a dominant masculinity), *tappay* constitute a rupture. In these, women subvert the social order by adopting an irreverent tone and humorous vocabulary, teasing one another about pleasure, frustration, as well as critique to gender roles, by centering marital and familial relationships (such as the bride and the groom or the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law). Recently, for many scholars, this rupture has been understood as indicating the articulation of women's resistance against oppressive structures. Sabahat Zakariya (2021) argues that *tappay*, in their original context, could operate as a form of feminist expression by articulating women's experiences within domestic hierarchies, even if they did not conform to contemporary definitions of feminism, by highlighting how patriarchal systems compel women to regulate and discipline one another.⁶⁹ Israr and Bibi (2025), in their study of traditional Pashto performances, similarly emphasize *tappay* as constituting "a dynamic repository of women's cultural and political thought" (2025, 201), articulating women's resistance in contexts of patriarchal norms, state violence and militancy. Nasir and Ghalib Hussain (2024) also underscore Punjabi *tappay* as a site of everyday women's resistance, tempering conformity and rebellion, allowing them to voice frustrations in accepted performative ways. Through the rewriting of these traditional songs, *Aurat March* volunteers employ the same humor, sarcasm and exaggeration through which original *tappay* operate to articulate emotions that, as women, are often socialized by patriarchal society to repress, silence or avoid expressing, such as anger, indignation,

⁶⁹ Sabahat Zakariya, "The Truth-Telling of the Punjabi Folk Song," YouTube video, March 9, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZSMB-yHk5tY>

grief. In this sense, *tappay* are sites of expression of “contentious emotions” within political movements: they become sites of struggle over meaning, legitimacy and identity, where different actors contest what is deemed appropriate, while simultaneously functioning as forces that both drive mobilisation and expose the workings of power.

3.5.2 Rehearsing Tappay, Reimagining Justice

Chitta Kukkar (White rooster)⁷⁰, introduced at the beginning of the chapter, provides a useful entry point for understanding how traditional *tappay* were reclaimed and mobilized to articulate feminist discourse and socio-political critique in the *dhholki* as well as in the march. The rhyme, characterized by a joyous melody and a catching rhythm, was maintained by the volunteers in its original structure, a series of triplets, each self-contained and independent, while transforming its content. The first line of a *tappa*, traditionally repeated to allow collective participation, provided a contextual reference to Punjabi daily life and society, usually a familiar description of animals, food, and nature (such as the presence of a *peepal* tree, a rooster etc). The subsequent lines containing the core message in a humorous manner, were reworked by the participants to embed political and feminist critique and to articulate their emotions into words. In *Chitta Kukkar*, the opening triplet recontextualized the narrative of the entire song, shifting the focus from marriage to the political struggles faced by women:

Chitta Kukar banere te
Chitta Kukar banere te
kasnī dupatte wāliye,
munḍā ṣadqe tere te

The lyrics were reimagined as:

Chitta kukar baneray te,
chitta kukkar baneray te

⁷⁰ *Punjabi Folk Classics*, “Chitta Kukkad (Full Video) || Musarrat Nazir || New Punjabi Wedding Folk Song || Nupur Audio,” YouTube video, 3:15, posted October 28, 2022.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=swoj4XjhKdE&list=RDswoj4XjhKdE&start_radio=1

*Apna haq mangan waliye,
jag oukha tere te*

The bride, celebrated for her beauty (*kasnī dupatte wāliye,*), and with whom the boy is in love (*munḍā ṣadqe tere te*), is turned into a woman fighting to assert her rights (*apna haq mangan waliye*), who navigates the obstacles and challenges posed by societal constraints (*jag oukha tere te*). The following triplets turn marriage from a site of celebration and excitement into a site where injustice is often enacted as well as fought back. The lyrics highlight the role of the parents, who support their daughter's claim to justice.

*Pipli diyan chawaan ni,
pipli diyan chawaan ni
Apay shikan katwa ke,
maa pay karan duawan nay*

Under the comforting shade of a Peepal Tree (*Pipli diyan chawaan ni*), parents, who in the original version offer prayers for the bride on the palanquin, are now blessing the bride standing up for her demands (*Apay shikan katwa ke, maa pay karan duawan nay*), who actively challenges her constraints. As the subsequent triplet points at, the woman is now deemed fortunate (*qismat wali*) no longer merely by getting married (or, as the lyrics says, by getting her hands decorated with *mehndī, hathān uṭṭe mehndī lag gayī*), but for her agency and the justice she obtains and secures for herself (*adalat ton insaf mil gaya, kissi qismat wali nu*).

*Kunda lg gya thali nu,
kunda lg gya thali nu,
Adalat ton insaf mil gaya,
kissi qismat wali nu*

According to Hussain and Rasul (2016), humor functions as a “reality play” (30), revealing aspects of social structures that often remain invisible. In this context, the theme of justice presented in the extended metaphor of the wedding to the border struggles of women seeking justice throughout their lives: from marital rights, it pointed to how structural violence is ingrained in the society and perpetuated. The *tappa* reflected the theme of that year's *Aurat March 'Aṣal Inṣāf'* (True Justice) in a poetic and

playful form. This was particularly evident in one triplet, in which the collective metaphorically confronted the impunity of men who commit violence and are shielded by the system.

*Ālū maṭṭar pakāye hu'e ne
Ālū maṭṭar pakāye hu'e ne
Sadde kolon button change,
jerhe sine nāl lāye hu'e hain*

The original lyrics depict a woman teasing her groom, noting that his buttons, a word that, in both sound and shape, playfully echoes *maṭṭar* (peas), are kept closer to his chest rather than she is. Through this metaphor, humor conveys underlying emotions such as longing, closeness and affection, expressed through playful complaints and affectionate jealousy. In the rewritten *tappa*, volunteers replace “button” with “harasser”:

*Aalo matar pakaye huye ne
Aalo matar pakaye huye ne
Saday kolon harasser changey,
jirhe seenay nal laye huye ne*

Here, the harasser is metaphorically positioned closer to the chest, suggesting that he is afforded greater importance in the form of protection than those who sing, i.e. the women. In the context of *Aurat March*, the lyrics of *Chitta Kukkar* are repurposed to critique how society, from politics to the judicial system, grants institutional protection to men accused of harassment, keeping them “closer to their chest” than the victims of that violence. The original playful teasing is thus transformed into sharp, bitter sarcasm, exposing structural violence and channeling collective anger at societal complicity in upholding and perpetuating injustice. The discourse of accountability and justice promoted by the *Aurat March* was shaped by numerous cases of gender-based violence and broader systemic failures in responding to them that the movement addressed over the years. In 2022, this anger was turned into a political manifesto, calling for the need to “reimagine justice” (*Aurat March* 2022). The manifesto presented at the press conference underscored how justice was deeply entangled with structural violence embedded within political institutions, courts, and police, disproportionately

impacting women, *khwāja-sīrās* (trans people), and other gender minorities. These groups have been facing multiple biases: reports of harassment or assault are frequently dismissed by the police or the court, survivors are silenced or forced to reconcile, and their “moral character” is stigmatized. As volunteers wrote, “the culture of *ek chup sau sukh*⁷¹ teaches survivors of patriarchal violence to internalise abuse to preserve relationships and avoid becoming social *pariahs*” (*Ibid*). On the other side, perpetrators are frequently released or acquitted due to poor investigations, often resulting in further violence towards the victims. As Wardah, who sung the *tappa* at the march, told me:

*“Jo harassment karte hain... Ali Zafar kā nām liyā. Aur logon kā nām liyā. Bare bare harasser... ‘adālaton se leke aur bahut sāre politicians? ke andar bahut sāre log aise maujūd hain, skūlon ke andar bhī, daftaron ke andar bhī... Jo harassment karte hain unko kuch nahīn kahā jātā. Workplace harassment is very common, bacchon ko tarnā bacchon ko dekhnā, laṛkiyon ko tang karnā, chednā... Jaise youtubers the! Abhī yeh sāre harassers... Aur unko kuch kah bhī nahīn rahā! Kyā inko kisī police ne uthāyā? Kyā kisī ne inko pakṛā? To sadde kolo harasser change jerhe sīne nāl laye ne!”*⁷² (Wardah, March 18, 2023)

In a society where women have been frequently left with a sense of **unachieved justice**, art and creativity became recurring strategies for volunteers to channel anger, as in the *tappay*, through sarcasm and humor. Art installations on the day of the march were similarly deployed to articulate anger and hold harassers accountable. As Wardah noted, youtubers over the years have repeatedly harassed marchers, approached them without consent and persistently and contributed to a stigmatized narrative which undermined the march. In response, in 2022 and 2023 volunteers created art installations to expose their misogyny, false narratives and hateful remarks. The conflict that erupted around the installation illustrates the contentious negotiation of anger: while volunteers used it to articulate dissent through humor, youtubers attempted to delegitimize women by portraying them as emotional, irrational, “angry women”. In this

⁷¹ One silence brings about a hundred comforts/happiness.

⁷² “Those who harass... They mentioned Ali Zafar’s name, and also the names of other people. Big-time harassers... from courts to many people in politics, there are many such people present, in schools, in offices too... Those who harass are not held accountable. Workplace harassment is very common, teasing children, bothering girls... Like the YouTubers! Right now, all these harassers... And no one is saying anything to them! Has the police ever picked them up? Has anyone caught them? So “sadde kolo harasser change, jehre seene naal laye hue ne!”

context, as Blom has explored, emotions become significant for the way different actors confer a new political status and performativity, turning it a justification for claims to exercise control. Over the years, other types of art installations have been deployed to speak out against unpunished violence, producing counter-narratives centering victims, such as the #MeToo blanket, a long cloth documenting experiences of harassment and “Stains of Patriarchy”, hanging clothes symbolising the victims of gendered violence. These interventions sparked heavy accusations: the images of the blanket, for instance, were intentionally misinterpreted and doctored to allege blasphemy, resulting in death and rape threats to the volunteers, petitions to limit the event, and attempts to censor certain slogans or artworks. By contrast, *tappay* offered a celebratory powerful space at the march in which anger could be expressed: through music and performance and a more socially accepted effective practice of humor, anger could be felt, expressed, and transformed into a public denunciation of injustice, violence, and grief.



Fig.19 Senior WAF activists singing the *Tappay*. *Aurat March* Lahore. March 8, 2023. Source: Aurat March Lahore.

3.5.3 Laughing at Power: Irreverence and Disrespect

In 2023, during a whatsapp group discussion, volunteers exchanged suggestions for *tappay*, with one proposal being to adapt the Punjabi old song *Rāt de Barāh Baje*⁷³, an idea that was met with immediate enthusiasm.

Participant 1: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=chcGwtvEZg4> meri ammi ne idea diya hai isspe bananay ka

"kon hai?" followed by something like "pidarshahi/misogyny/something else we don't like" and then "bhaarh main jao"

This is also a popular dholki thing

[23:45, 27/2/2023] Participant 2: ok ur mom needs to get in touch with my mom

[23:53, 27/2/2023] Participant 3: "Kon hai?"

"[name of a famous person]"

"Confirm laanti hai confirm laanti hai"

[23:57, 27/2/2023] Participant 4: Loveeeee⁷⁴

Traditionally sung at *dholkis*, the song presented a woman waking up in the middle of the night by a frightening noise, anxiously approaching the door and asking "*Kaun hai?*" (Who is it?) In its traditional use, the question served as a playful device through which family members are teasingly named and mocked. This structure was repurposed to address institutions (patriarchy, misogyny) and, as one volunteer suggested, to call out specific public figures who had actively opposed the collective, marking a shift in tone from teasing to denunciation. The comment "*confirm laanti hai*" ("surely to be cursed", from "*lanat*", curse), a referral of the phrase *confirm jannatī hai* ("surely destined for heaven"), marked a register of symbolic judgment. Over the years, *Aurat March* has been the object of attack by a range of actors who have constructed hostile narratives against it. The backlash has been carried out mainly by the state, the religious circles and the media (Abbas, Lashari, Wakil 2025). Beyond the harassing coverage of the youtubers during the March, prominent media personalities such as Orya Maqbool Jan and Anсад Abbasi, politicians including Mushtaq Ahhmed of the religious-wing party *Jamā'at-e-Islāmī* and extremist religious group *Tahrīk-e-Tālibān Pakistan* (TTP), have been mobilizing against *Aurat March*, labelling it as blasphemous, spreading obscenity and vulgarity (Reuters 2021) and arguing that *Aurat March* threatens an Islamic

⁷³ Chenab Music Chiniot, "*Rat De Bara Waje | Noor Jahan*," YouTube video, 3:45, April 4, 2021 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=chcGwtvEZg4>

⁷⁴ Discussion happened on the 27/2/2023

society's social, cultural and spiritual values (Batool and Malik 2021; Zia 2022). Public figures like well-known playwright Khalil Ur Rehman have openly framed *Aurat March's* slogans and demands, from assertion of bodily autonomy to calls against gender-based violence, as socially destabilizing, positioning these claims as threats to normative family structures and social order (Habib, 2020). For instance, Ur Rehman mocked placards demanding an end to acid attacks, by questioning their validity: "Are all men just standing there with a bottle of acid?" (Alam 2021). In several cases, different actors filed petitions demanding state intervention against the march, such as in 2020, when conservatives approached the High Court in Lahore to ban the *Aurat March* on the grounds of obscenity (Hussain 2020). *Aurat March's* volunteers have replied to these by defending their constitutional right to assembly through legal representation, press conferences, and collaborations with human rights lawyers and civil society actors. While this strategy was mainly defensive, aimed at safeguarding the march's legitimacy, I argue that, by shifting the focus on creative practices it is possible to see how these opened a different space for more subtle symbolic forms of confrontation, what Scott described as infrapolitics (Scott 1990). In these practices dissent has been articulated more indirectly through ambiguity and mockery, operating beneath the surface of formal political confrontation. The collective rewriting of songs in the days leading up to the march created, in this sense, a space for critique, not through formal argumentation, but through affective expression and catharsis, pointing at how power worked and could be destabilized.

During the 2024 *dholki* I became part of a lively discussion on how to mock **Maria B**, a fashion designer who in the last years had launched a campaign against *Aurat March*, accusing volunteers of being "western elite women", spreading *fahashī* (obscenity) and funded by foreign sources⁷⁵. Her campaign mostly accused *Aurat March* of supporting an alleged "lgbtqi agenda", referring to its yearly inclusion and advocate for the trans and *khwāja-sīrā* community in the country. In the previous years Maria B and other

⁷⁵ "Aurat March Doesn't Represent All Pakistani Women, Says Maria B." *Dialogue Pakistan*, February 15, 2025. <https://dialoguepakistan.com/en/life-style/aurat-march-doesn-t-represent-all-pakistani-women--says-maria-b> ; "Maria B Responds Firmly to Aurat March Lahore's Protest." *Pakistan State Time*, February 18, 2025. <https://www.pstimes.com/maria-b-responds-aurat-march-lahore>.

media figures had become among the main promoters of hate campaigns against the community, amplifying the transphobic right-wing narrative by the religious party *Jamā'at-e-Islāmī*. As Sheherbano Zia argued, Maria B's moral performance served as a mediator between religious authorities and the State's populist piety project, exercising a logic of exclusion that the author defined, drawing from Mbembe, "necropolitics". Through her celeb status, her narrative had turned gender minorities' lives disposable, without dignity or equal citizenship, as she argued, while contesting the Trans Gender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018 (TPA 2018), claiming that it threatened social and moral order by allowing transgender people to self-identify as women⁷⁶. The following discussion transcribed from the *dholki* reveals the tangible anger against her, as volunteers and members of the trans community looked for songs to use against her.

Speaker 1 *Nagīn wālā...*

Speaker 2 *Nahīn, nahīn, pahle yeh wālā!* [No, the first one!]

Speaker 3 "Merā husband mujhse pyār nahin karte," *kisī ne sunā hai?* [Has anyone heard [the song] "My husband doesn't love me?]

[women start laughing]

Speaker 3 *Inko patā hī nahīn hai!* [quoting the song: He doesn't even know!]

Group (Overlapping laughter and shouting)

Speaker *Mujhse kartā hī nahīn hai* (laughs) [He doesn't even do that"]

Speaker 4 *I swear I wouldn't laugh but... ye bahut zyāda ho jāyegā. Bahut mazā āyā hai!* [But it will be very fun! A lot of fun!]

Speaker 1 *Nahīn, Nagīn wālā... nagīn wālā version...* [No, the Nangin wala song!]

Speaker 3 *Nahīn, woh pahle wālā koshish, nagīn wālā jo actual purānā thā.* [The first version of *Nagīn* song, the old one!]

Group (Chutkī bajāte aur gāte hu'e) Main nagīn nagīn nagīn nagīn... nagīn nagīn...

Speaker x: Nahīn, ko'ī aur gana! [No, some other song!]

Speaker 3 **Nahīn, it's not humiliating enough.**

(group laughs)

Speaker x *Hān, I agree!*

Speaker 7 *Hān, hamen aur chahiye.* [Yes, we need more]

Speaker 2 (as a trans woman enters, everyone turns!) **Ā! Maria B ke liye ko'ī aisā gānā batā'o kī usko do hafte nīnd na āye! Ā jā'o** (laugh) [A! Say some song for Maria B that wouldn't make her sleep for two weeks!]

Speaker (transwoman) **Ā jā, choro choro Maria B...** [Just leave Maria B!] Why do we have to care about Maria B? It's about everyone.

Speaker 6: *We care about everyone whose.. Let's be petty!*

⁷⁶ "Transgender Act Was Originally for Intersex People but It Was Hijacked: Maria B," *Aaj English TV*, December 15, 2022.

<https://english.aaj.tv/news/30306956/transgender-act-was-originally-for-intersex-people-but-it-was-hijacked-maria-b>

Speaker (transwoman) *No, let's just have some fun. Why care about Maria B so much?*
 Speaker 6: *This is very much to send a message for her!*
 Speaker (transwoman) to the woman sitting next to her: *She is the prime target!*
 (Everyone laughs)
 Speaker 2: *Jitnā usne rulāyā hai, ab ham hansī khushī men to karenge, na?* [She made us cry so much, not it's our turn to do this happily, no?]⁷⁷

As shown in the interaction, the discussion on the *tappay* provided a cathartic space where contentious emotions were collectively addressed, elaborated and channeled through jokes and laughter. As participants discussed different songs they also brought together and navigated anger, resentment as well as a desire for a playful revenge against the fashion designer (*itne usne rulāyā, ab ham hansī khushī main to karenge, na?*). This anger was particularly intense at the time in which the *dholki* took place, as only a few months earlier, the Oscar-winning *Joyland* movie, featuring Lahori transgender actress Alina Khan and involving the work of one of the volunteers had been banned in the country. The ban, eventually lifted in many parts of Pakistan, was still enforced in Lahore and across the province, carrying both material and symbolic impact for its actors and producers, given that the narrative was set and unfolded in Lahore.⁷⁸ The digital backlash, amplified through anti-trans campaigns and actively fueled by Maria B, contributed to a surge of hate speech and attacks, exerting pressure on state institutions and ultimately playing a role in the film's censorship. For the actress and the volunteers, both present at the gathering, it was an important moment to channel their anger into laughter and collective mockery. Participants proposed different songs that exposed personal traits (the song *Nagin*)⁷⁹ or could ridicule her conduct, for instance explaining her hate by assuming her loveless life (the song *Merā husband mujhse pyār nahīn kartā*).⁸⁰ The search for songs that could belittle her (*nahīn, it's not humiliating enough*), or irritate her (*ko'ī aisā gānā batā'o ke usko do hafte nīnd na āye*) reveals how humor and exaggeration were strategically mobilized in a form of **mockery**

⁷⁷ Discussion happened on 02/03/2024.

⁷⁸ *Punjab Govt Bans Joyland Less Than 24 Hours After Federal Govt Gives It the Green Light*. Aaj English TV, November 17, 2022. <https://english.aaj.tv/news/30304428>

⁷⁹ Sony Music India, "Main Nagin Dance - Full Audio Song | Bajatey Raho | Maryam Zakaria & Scarlett Wilson," YouTube video, 3:41, December 5, 2016 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iUPe_e65nto&list=RDjUPe_e65nto&start_radio=1

⁸⁰ Rinku Bhabhi, "Mere Husband Mujhko Piyar Nahin Karte | Sunil Grover," Elephant Company, YouTube video, 3:21, March 8, 2017 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=37jSVy-9FOs&list=RD37jSVy-9FOs&start_radio=1

to transform shared emotions into collective expression. Robinson and Smith-Lovin (2001,125) point at humour's stress-reducing function, a dynamic that became evident at the event, where it shaped the creation and rehearsal of the songs, releasing tension, channeling frustration and enabling creative critique of the women, while strengthening bonds and sustaining a safe space for collective expression and participation.



Fig. 20: Details from a singing/playing sequence from the *Feminist Dholki* 2024. Source: Photos of the author. March, 2, 2024

In her ethnography, Abu-Lughod (1986) showed how women's **irreverence** emerged as a central discourse subversion thought that they would mock men's manhood and sexual authority, challenging the moral superiority that underpins patriarchal power. A similar dynamic emerged in the *dholki*, where volunteers deployed irreverence to target public figures such as Maria B and exposing the double-standard moral authority she claims. By parodying her as a public figure, ridiculizing the hatred Maria B propagates and her immoral character, they questioned the very legitimacy of the social hierarchies she embodies. In this context, mocking her public image points at how power operates through credibility, respectability and performance: irreverence becomes a central mode of resistance, a way to challenge moral authority not through direct confrontation, but by stripping it of its aura. Drawing from the Palestinian scholar El-Kurd (2025), irreverence is not only a "dignifying act of refusal" but also "a form of self-preservation and defiance, a stubborn rejection of psychological subjugation" (208).

At the same time, irreverence also took the form of withdrawal. During the discussion, a transwoman remarked: “*Ā jā, choro Maria B, why do we have to care about Maria B so much?*” This refusal to grant attention points also at how resistance means disrupting the celebrity logic that thrives on visibility. Even as Maria B was ironically described as the “prime target” to convey collective frustration (“to send a message, let’s be petty”), the *tappay* became a space for debating how and why public condemnation should be staged. Much like Abu Lughod’s account, irreverence here not only voiced critique but reconfigured the terms on which authority could be acknowledged at all. Aiman Rizvi (2024) positions “respect” as a key regulatory mechanism through which patriarchal power is maintained across Pakistani society. According to her analysis, *Aurat March*’s resistance must be situated within border structures of power that mobilizes notions of respectability to discipline women’s bodies, speech and presence. In this framework, disrespect and irreverence become politically significant for the way they destabilized a moral code of behaviour. Alongside the *tappay* and the art installations curated by the volunteers, a huge number of placards brought by the marchers was labelled as obscene, immoral and vulgar. This process symbolises also an important shift from the previous women’s rights movements, where although humor and sarcasm were often deployed within *jalsas*, such as skits and plays, this occurred within private, indoor gatherings (Shaheed 1984). As Rizvi points out, “this wasn’t a women’s rights movement, it was a feminist resistance against the very existence of the kind of power that sought to give or take these rights” (2024,178-179). Building on Sophie Richter-Devroe’s study of the everyday resistance of Palestinian women, I argue that mockery, laughing and joy contained in the *tappay*, whether they do not radically alter the oppressors’ material base, serve “to resist and defy the intended effects” (2018, 109): while not directly confronting individuals, they elaborate and subvert the impact that public backlash and accusations have on volunteers’ bodies and minds.

3.6 Resistance in Disguise: Bringing Irreverence in Public

3.6.1 Performing Mockery at the March

During the *Aurat March*, as soon as the public took their seats in front of the stage, **alongside Chitta Kukkar** the song ***Raat de Baara Baje*** was played and sung aloud by a few volunteers at the opening of the gathering. After invoking the fashion designer's name and prompting cheers from the crowd, one volunteer turned to the audience and asked: *Kī kendī hai* (what does she say)? When the audience remained silent, volunteers began to sing:

*Naye kapre badalkar jā'ūn kahān
aur bāl banā'ūn kis ke liye?
Yeh sab to mahangā kar diyā,
main bāhar jā'ūn kis ke liye?*⁸¹

The original melancholic *ghazal* by Urdu poet Nasir Kazmi⁸², conveying a sense of paralysis and inability to find a purpose in doing small things after the departure of a beloved person (*Woh shakhṣ to shahar hī chhod gayā*) is turned into mockery. By altering the third line (*yeh sab to mahangā kar diyā*), the volunteer recasts the fashion designer as a lonely and purposeless figure, whose labour of designing and selling clothes appears futile.

During the public performance at the *March*, humor operated differently, becoming part of a performative strategy that engaged the audience while expressing critique outwardly. Whereas humor at the *dholki* primarily served as an affective dimension for the group itself, at the *March* it became a tool to articulate public condemnation in the public sphere, turning it into a space of moral and political accountability and subversive pleasure. In public spaces, dissent and criticism are deeply subjected to controversy and potential legal repercussions, exposing participants to a greater risk. This was also reflected in the fact that at the *March* the *tappay* addressing particular famous people were often performed by only a few volunteers, as not all felt comfortable voicing critique in highly public and mediatized contexts. Situating this within Scott's framework (1990), mockery can be understood as a form of infrapolitics that allows dissent to be

⁸¹ "Where should I go after changing into new clothes / and for whom should I arrange my hair? That person has left the city altogether / for whose sake should I step outside now?"

⁸² Kazmi, Nasir. n.d. Na'e kapre badalkar jā'ūn kahān aur bāl banā'ūn kis ke liye." *Rekhta*. <https://www.rekhta.org/ghazals/nae-kapde-badal-kar-jaaun-kahaan-aur-baal-banaun-kis-ke-liye-nasir-kazmi-ghazals>

expressed publicly, yet in a strategically disguised form. Irriverence, through mockery, operates as a way through which an **offstage hidden discourse** and **contentious emotions** are insinuated in the public transcripts within a disguised form, making them culturally legible and politically acceptable. The disguise here does not involve hiding the identities of speakers or targets. Instead, it is embedded in the performance itself: through mockery, in the local form of the *tappa*, criticism is acceptable and resonant, even when openly calling out individuals in a defiant and angry tone. While public figures were openly named, the message was humorous or ambiguous. Playwright Khalil Ur Rehman, known for his sexist language against *Aurat March*, its supporters and the rampant misogyny of his dramas (particularly for using the expression *do takke kī 'aurat*, a worthless woman)⁸³ was mocked when a volunteer prompted the audience asking “*Kī kenda hai?*” to which they replied: *Main do takke kā admī hūn!* (I am a worthless man!). Similarly, singer Ali Zafar, accused of sexual harassment during the #MeToo movement, was referenced through the verses of the Bollywood song *Jab main laṛkī dekhā merā dil diwāna bole: Ole ole ole ole ole ole* (from *Yeh Dillagī*, 1994), pointing at women’s objectification.⁸⁴ The hint at this predator attitude without stating the legal accusation also reflected volunteers’ strategy to safeguard themselves, probably as the singer had denied the charge and in response had filed a high-profile defamation suit that was being contested in court. As Scott observed, the “polyvalent symbolism” (1990, 161-162) of cultural expression allows its modulation, the possibility to make meanings accessible to a chosen audience while remaining hidden for others. In particular, the oral character of the songs (as well as the gestures, expressions, tone etc.) allow volunteers to retain control over the manner of its dissemination, the places and the audience, making each performance more nuanced and disguised according to surveillance and threats. Scott, drawing from Bakhtin’s study of the *carnevalesque* (1984), describes the significance of “rituals of reversal”, such as carnivals and *fêtes*, as “institutionalized form of political disguise” (1990, 173), where hierarchies were

⁸³ *How Khalilur Rehman’s Act of Abusing Me on TV Normalised Objectification of Women*, Naya Daur, March 8 2020, <https://nayadaur.tv/08-Mar-2020/how-khalilur-rehman-s-act-of-abusing-me-on-tv-normalised-objectification-of-women>

⁸⁴ “Singer Meesha Shafi Accuses Ali Zafar of Sexual Harassment,” *Dawn*, April 20, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1402701>; “More Women Accuse Ali Zafar of Harassment,” *The News*, April 21, 2018, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/307066-more-women-accuse-ali-zafar-of-harassment>

temporarily subverted and ritualized through mockery. In a similar way, I argue that *tappay* shaped *Aurat March* march into a “**realm of release**” (175) providing volunteers with a space to publicly articulate mockery against particular figures through humor, parody and by leveraging on physical exuberance. In line with Scott and Bakhtin’s formulation of these rituals, I argue that *Aurat March* does not determine a “real” and immediate change of material conditions of oppression and patriarchal hierarchies, but it performs an essential imaginative function, allowing participants to envision political alternatives built on an experienced collective strength.

3.6.2 *Humor in Networked struggles*

Since 2018, digital platforms, such as Whatsapp, Facebook and Instagram, have served a central role for the articulation of *Aurat March* politics, enabling the creation of the movement and its collective action, making feminism in Pakistan “inextricable from technology and the internet” (Digital Rights Foundation 2020). The building of digital communities has been described as one of the main strategies of the movement, leading to a shift from traditional methods of organizing while creating a sense of belonging and support through vibrant online enclaves (Abbas, Lashari and Wakil 2025). At the same time, the unprecedented visibility has been accompanied by intensified control and backlash, turning the internet as a primary site of contestation, censorship, and harassment against the *Aurat March*. Social media have enabled the circulation of misogynistic and transphobic narratives, with several volunteers I spoke to reporting attacks in the forms of trolling, slurs, rape and death threats. As Alam pointed out, these reflect a newly visible version of Pakistani machosim in defense of masculinity (Alam 2021). Kamal (2021) has coined the term “networked struggle” to discuss how fights around visual production of *Aurat March* have occurred in online spaces between forms of “networked feminism” and “networked misogyny”. The concept points at the nature of the engagement of feminist subjectivities, and its antagonists, within social media networks, taking the form through an assemblage of online and physical spaces. These online struggles, according to Kamal, are visible in the forms of selective outrage, doctored images, and disinformation campaigns used to

distort protest demands or falsely link activists with foreign agendas, which led volunteers to defend against these attempts to delegitimize their credibility and work.

Following the 2024 *dholki*, volunteers shared videos and images of the event on Instagram, capturing scenes of them playing the *dholak* and singing *tappay*. The video circulated featured footage of volunteers singing together a melody that merged *Raat De Baara Baje* with the aforementioned song *Mere Husband Mujhko Pyār Nahīn Karte*. The lyrics, written in the post, turned the indifferent husband into unaffectionate voters, mocking the religious right-wing party *Jamā‘at-e-Islāmī* (JI) and its propaganda, which had fiercely and consistently opposed the *Aurat March* since its inception. The post recited:

(2024) Some snippets from *dholki* 🎵🎵🎵

*Rāt de 12 baje āke merī nindal khule,
patta ko’ī kharke te main dil nu pharr ke baini ān
band bua de qol khaloqay, hauli hauli kendi ān
Kaun hai? Jammaat hai,
Nī, kī kendiye ne?
In ko ta hī nahīn hai,
in se hotā hī nahīn hai,
in ko patā hī nahīn hai,
Mere voters mujh se pyār nahīn karte.*⁸⁵

The original lyrics were reused to address the party: “What do they say? They themselves don’t even know how! They themselves are not capable of it! They themselves don’t have any idea! My voters don’t love me!”.

In the video that was uploaded, the mocking and targeting of *Jamā‘at-e-Islāmī* was carefully curated, with participants’ faces being deliberately obscured to prevent identification. This strategy, also evident in other online content from the march and other activities, points at how negotiating visibility has been a crucial means of safeguarding personal security and privacy in digital spaces against online harassment and trolling, potential legal and political repercussions. Beyond organizing the annual

⁸⁵ "At 12 at night, my sleep gets interrupted / If a leaf rustles, I tear open my heart / I speak softly, closing the doors to the world / Who is it? / It's Jamat-e-Islami! / What do they say? / They don't know anything / They just can't do it / They have no idea / My voters don't love me." Source: @aurat march lahore , Instagram. March 3, 2024. <https://www.instagram.com/p/C4DDKyvrP0T/>

Hayā March as a countermobilization, the party had been central in online spaces in the production and dissemination of populist propaganda targeting the *March* and members of the transgender community. This narrative had gained success by translating religious conservatism into accessible, viral content, making transphobic arguments mainstream, and amplifying moral panic. Hira Azmat (2023) argued that this entanglement of digital spaces and religion has been central in building coordinated online harassment campaigns led by religious groups through hashtags and media content, which have amplified intimidation, leading to forms of self-censorship and moderated visibility.

As Hija Kamran pointed out (2020), legal tools created to control and punish cybercrime, such as the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) in 2016, have been instead repetitively deployed to regulate and censor citizens' internet use, suppress dissent and curtail free speech in the name of public order, decency and morality, terms that are arbitrarily signified. For many activists I spoke to, morality had been used against them to justify censorship in the name of *fahashī* (immorality, indecency, vulgarity), making it difficult for them to navigate digital spaces. Censorship emerges as deeply intertwined with hypermasculine interpretations of religious and cultural values, where scrutinizing women's bodies and behaviour is depicted as immoral and religious obligation (both online and offline). Beyond this moral regulation, state surveillance and internet bans have also impacted women's online political work. As noted by Khokhar (2025), the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) has frequently imposed internet shutdowns, particularly during protests or politically sensitive moments, thereby constraining activists' visibility and ability to organize.

In this context of gendered surveillance, misogyny and moral regulation, the *Aurat March* strategically deployed humor and mockery while negotiating visibility, particularly through memes, parody accounts, reels as tools for mock public figures in the digital space. Beyond the movement's official platforms, parody narrative and satirical content also circulated through loosely affiliated or anonymized Instagram pages that echoed and amplified feminist critiques. In 2024, few days after the march, the Instagram account *mafiaacalmdown* became a central site for critiquing a video shared by Maria B

where she had referred to the *Aurat March* as the “transgender march,” deploying the term as a slur, and labeled it as *qaum-e-Lut* (the people of Lot). The name invoked a religious reference commonly associated with sin, impurity, and sexual immorality. Beside this, she had further mocked the march’s slogan “izzat tou deni paregi” (“you will have to give us respect”), reframing it as “zillat tou milegi” (“you will receive humiliation/dishonor”). The account *mafiacalmdown* posted a counter-video ridiculing her “obsession” with the movement, and using rhetorical strategies to attack the fashion designer⁸⁶. Reversing her moral narrative, the video sarcastically suggested that she herself was “destined for hell,” mocking her attempts to rebrand the march by instead calling for a “rebranding” of her own business, “*MafiaB: qaum ko lootnay ka business*” (MafiaB: the business of looting the nation), using wordplay and visual satire. The reel further juxtaposed her invocation of *qaum-e-Lut* with images from the march’s artwork and installations from that year which had addressed issues such as the killing of children in Palestine or enforced disappearances in Balochistan. In line with the religious symbolism she had deployed, the incoming month of *Ramzān* was invoked not as a call for the march’s purification, but as a plea for liberation from her rhetoric.

From both the video of the *dholki* and the one targeting Maria B, humor in digital spaces emerges as a strategic mode of critique, widely deployed by volunteers to articulate dissent in the form of mockery. Yet, I argue that it becomes strategic precisely through the regulation of visibility: only by carefully managing exposure, deciding what to reveal, what to obscure, and the anonymity, can humor function as critique and reclaim narrative control within a hostile and closely monitored online environment. This shows how although, as Areej Akhtar (2021) has pointed out, meme culture in Pakistan has operated as a vehicle of moral policing by providing men with new digital outlets to degrade and discipline women, the same formats have also been powerfully appropriated by feminist actors to counter them. Parody videos of Maria B or the *tappay* can be understood through Scott’s concept of infrapolitics, functioning much like gossip and rumors, which circulate information about personal behaviour, social standing or moral conducts, exaggerating or distorting details in the public. By focusing on public

⁸⁶ @mafiacalmdown, “*Mafia Cysters and Their Obsession Aurat March*” Instagram, posted March 11, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C4ZBopaLL9G/>

figure's behaviour and statements, the videos similarly challenge their authority and credibility, bringing a political critique in the digital sphere while simultaneously safeguarding their identities from potential harassment and retaliation.

Memes, parody reels and videos illustrate how volunteers' resistance within "networked struggles" (Kamal 2021) and reveal how power is enacted through discursive violence, which is articulated through online moral scrutiny, ridiculing and silencing women's demands, harassment and misogyny. These entanglements of power and resistance in digital spaces are crucial to understand recent shifts in Pakistan's political landscape, where religious nationalism, political opportunism, and digital manipulation have converged, and where figures like Maria B could leverage celebrity status, popular sentiment and self-proclaimed religious authority to shape public discourse. Volunteers' practices point to how, in online spaces, power emerges as operating not only through moral state mechanisms, but through coordinated hashtags, viral speeches, disinformation campaigns, and amplification by television personalities and religious groups. Such dynamics reflect a mechanism of cultural regulation (Mazzarella and Kaur 2009) whereby censorship is enacted not solely through explicit bans but through diffuse processes of moral framing, public pressure, and affective mobilization. In this context, silencing, harassment, functions as an informal, decentralized, and socially engineered practice, operating beyond direct state prohibition yet often in co-optation or alignment with state power and populist religious groups.

3.7. Conclusion

"The monotonously pulsating 'dholki' is the invariable accompaniment in most of the folk songs, representing what is always present - Time and Society. Against the grain and unvarying beat of what is always present plays the varying rhythm of individual emotion represented by the voice of the performers. The voice bases itself in the unchanging pulsation of the dholki but ventures out repeatedly to assert itself; it is invariably pulled back by the "dholki". "What could have been rises dancingly out of "what always was" and falls back into it, accepting the destiny with a curiously helpless ecstasy. Rhythm of possibility reacts against the rhythm of actuality and then turns back to seek harmony with it" (Najm Hosain Syed 2003)

Lahori-based poet Najm Syed Hosain's evocatively describes the *dholki* as a space where the steady rhythm of the *dholak* can be seen as reproducing the enduring cadence of society, while the voices of the performers momentarily venture beyond it, before ultimately returning to its pulse. Building on this poetic portrayal by Hosain, we could argue how in the feminist *dholki*, women's voices, rather than falling back into the existing rhythm of social order, they disrupt it: they collectively rework it, articulating and envisioning alternative feminist visions of the society in which they want to inhabit. The *dholkis* I attended over the years functioned not merely as cultural gatherings or fundraising events, but as spaces where resistance was actively imagined, framed and performed. Practices such as rewriting and singing *tappay*, applying mehndi or exchanging *gajres*, and dancing transformed joy into a deliberate expression of feminist resistance. Reading these intimate gatherings alongside public acts of marching reveals that joy was not a personal emotion, but an embodied collective practice that both negotiated and challenged power hierarchies and societal norms. In Abu Lughod's words, joy illuminates overlapping systems of domination, where emotional regulation coexists with discursive authority. Rooting resistance within *tappay* and cultural practices emerged as a process of resignification and reworking of culture itself. If, as Punjabi poet Najm Hosain Syed argues (2003) Punjabi folk songs "embody and recall the emotional experience of the community" (10), recording "reactions to cycles", and observing "the rhythm of despair and exultation, nostalgia and hope, questioning and faith"(11), then the collective creation and singing of feminist *tappay* can be understood as an emotional transformative experience for the group, one that challenges patriarchal narratives about women, which records feminist shifts as they play their own rhythms. This process made visible the power relations against which participants mobilize, while also revealing how volunteers negotiate their political and resistant subjectivities in relation to their distinct positionalities and personal histories. The uneven access to local cultural idioms, including familiarity with Punjabi, was mediated through collective rehearsal and the chanting of the *tappay*, transforming unfamiliar spaces into shared, temporary sites of belonging defined by learning and enjoyment. **Irriverence**, articulated thought mockery, humor and sarcasm, emerged as an infrapolitical strategy which allowed dissent across domestic and public space. *Tappay*, parody videos and other

performances strategically confronted patriarchal authority, targeting specific individuals while exposing broader moral and political hierarchies that seek to publicly regulate women's speech and behaviour on the basis of respect and morality. In doing so, these practices pointed at how power operates as discursive and moral authority, shaping who may speak and how emotions should be expressed across physical and digital spaces. By articulating "contentious emotions" such as anger, frustration, joy and pain, *Aurat March* destabilized moral and political legitimacy, transforming affective expression into a tool of resistance. In this sense, these performances are not isolated acts but part of a continuum of offline and digital counter-strategies, evolving forms of resistance shaped by ongoing engagements with societal backlash, asserting affective practice against the discursive violence across multiple spaces.

Drawing on Alam (2021), I argue that defining **patriarchal backlash** simply as a reactive attempt to regain lost power is insufficient in the Pakistani context; here state and societal actors mobilize coercive power preemptively to prevent challenges to established gender hierarchies. Practices such as discourse silencing, digital surveillance, and moral delegitimization of volunteers are not merely reactive, but constitute proactive mechanisms through which authority seeks to control gendered visibility and expression. Religious pressure groups such as TLP and TTP merged cultural morality and political Islam to enforce moral policing and surveillance on women's increasing public presence in the streets. Transphobic campaigns against the transcommunity, on the other side, responded to a moment in which legal protections for trans people had been enhanced (2018) and the first *Moorat March* (Transgender March) had taken place in Karachi (2022).

To conclude, I argue that the reclamation of *tappay* and other regional cultural practices and affective modes of expression should be also read as an attempt to restore women's symbolic and material vocal presence, once prominent in gender-specific spaces such as oral traditions and celebratory Punjabi gatherings, which progressively diminished over time. This erosion of women's cultural power is deeply connected with the Islamisation politics of Zia-ul-Haq (1977-1988) which marginalized regional and pluralist cultural forms, and the subsequent influence of religious groups such as TLP

and TTP. Against this backdrop, young generations of volunteers deliberately reclaim and rework Punjabi language and regional forms, asserting a vibrant cultural artistic space of expression and visibility that had long been constrained. Drawing from Ikram et al., their resistance can be described as “a story of tension - between repression and creativity, between imposed modesty and self-assertion” (2025, 1008).

Chapter 4

Performing Feminist Legacies: Cultural Memory and Collective Repertoires of Resistance in *Aurat March*

Manne dī mauj vich hassṇā khedṇā
*Dil kī rakhṇā kammā kanne?*⁸⁷

4.1 Introduction

4.1.1 Chapter Outline

In the previous chapter I examined how volunteers articulate feminist resistance by reclaiming and reworking rituals and cultural forms, such as the *tappay*, highlighting the political role of contentious emotions and affective modes, such as joy and irreverence. Building on scholarship on the aesthetics of protest (Werbner et al. 2014; McGarry et al. 2020) and performance studies (Butler 2015, Taylor 2003), this chapter explores performances within *Aurat March* as practices through which memory of women's resistance in the region is produced and articulated. Drawing in particular on Diana Taylor's concept of *repertoire*, I consider how embodied performances, including dances, poetry recitations, songs and collective chants may contribute to shaping particular understandings of feminist struggles, foregrounding certain histories, political identities and cultural memories, and situating contemporary activism in relation to them. In this sense, I consider how performances can operate as sites of legacy-making. In particular, the chapter explores how volunteers interpret their relationship to regional feminist praxis, especially in relation to Women's Action Forum, the network of women activists who mobilized across several Pakistani cities against

⁸⁷ "Enjoy life, laugh and play / why keep stressing your heart over work and concerns?" from "Manne dī Mauj" (1995) by Hadiqa Kiani. The song was played during *Aurat March* 2023.

the military regime of general Zia-UI-Haq in the 1980s. Sharing a similar urban, upper-middle-class background with *Aurat March* women, WAF members are frequently invoked by volunteers as political reference points and ‘foremothers’ in Lahore, where both groups are based. By examining how feminist memory is imagined, represented, and negotiated, I explore how volunteers situate themselves within an ongoing historical trajectory of women’s resistance to patriarchy. The following sections, therefore, analyze how volunteers understand their activism as historically situated, tracing how feminist genealogy and memories of resistance are relationally formed, contested, and reworked thought performances. Some of the **questions** I ask in this chapter are: How do embodied performances function as sites for the production, representation and enactment of cultural memory of resistance within the *Aurat March*? In what ways do these performative practices mediate and reconfigure the relationship between *Aurat March* and the Women’s Action Forum, and how do they shape the ongoing production of feminist legacy? How might attention to such repertoires allow us to reconceptualize feminist genealogies as nonlinear, entangled, and processual formations that unsettle the linear temporal frameworks of western feminist historiography?

After outlining the theoretical framework in the **introduction**, the **second paragraph** investigates how performance, in particular dance, functions as a repertoire of feminist resistance. Drawing from volunteers’ memories, I focus on the spontaneous performances of the Women’s Action Forum during the 2019 *Aurat March* to explore how dancing becomes relevant in shaping a new embodied sense of feminist legacy in the younger women. In doing so, the analysis situates these contemporary enactments within a longer feminist struggle, underscoring the centrality of dance as a powerful act of defiance during WAF anti-Zia uprisings and in the following decades.

By presenting some of the works by WAF members, Habib Jalib and Sangat’s enactment of Punjabi literary traditions, **paragraph three** examines how poetry recitations at the *Aurat March* function as central, embodied repertoires of anti-patriarchal resistance across different periods. In this section I explore how, through these performances, volunteers reclaim feminism as an indigenous practice, rooted in local, vernacular, political traditions of feminist, leftist movements and literary practices,

while asserting a historical political consciousness partially erased by the process of Islamization that shaped the country in the previous decades.

The fourth paragraph explores how a sense of collective feminist history took shape through the *Aurat March*, bringing together previously detached urban feminist formations into a more cohesive narrative of struggle. Drawing on conversations with Zoya, a volunteer earlier involved in urban collectives and later in *Aurat March*, the paragraph emphasizes how this proximity emerged through the articulation of affective ties, encounters, and relational spaces of validation in the years following the first march. Engaging with Andrea Hajek's framework of legacy-making, I explore how past struggles largely confined within older activist groups slowly are reworked into a living memory within younger generations, navigating epistemological differences, diverse practices and personal experiences.

Paragraph five explores how the musical repertoire of WAF, carried forward into the *Aurat March*, serves as a medium through which past transregional resistance to patriarchy is sustained and activated. After framing the march's soundscape as contested terrain, I examine how WAF songs, such as *Ṭor Ṭor Ke* or *Daryā Kī Qasam*, reactivate a transregionalist feminist repertoire forged through South Asian networks of creative exchanges, embodying histories of cross-border alliances and solidarity. Drawing on Soof's reflections on the ASR farewell party, I explore how the collective chanting of these songs produce intimate, affective spaces of inclusion, enabling her to situate her own personal and political struggle within a broader historical continuity shaped by the convergence of past and present resistances of women.

Finally, in the **sixth paragraph**, I question the dominant waves metaphor used to frame feminist history, pointing at its problematicity such as that of sidelining and erasing indigenous regional specific struggles and understanding of local political history. I propose reimagining feminist genealogies through nonlinear, processual, and affective lens that reflects volunteer's lived experiences, feelings, intergenerational bonds, and embodied practices described in the chapter, illustrating how cultural memory and political kinship are produced and sustained between past and present struggles. Using the metaphor of woven tapestry, I explore how diverse movements, women, and ideas

interlace across time, forming dynamic, living legacies where past and present struggles merge, inspire, nurture and reinforce one another.

4.1.2 Analyzing Legacy-Making through Performance Studies

Scholarly work has tended to build the genealogy of the larger women's movement(s) in the region by classifying it in consecutive phases and by using a **chronological lens**, reproducing and prioritizing a sequential account of their development (Batool 2020; Haroon 1995; Shaheed 2010; Imran and Munir 2018, Zia 2009). Scholarship developed after *Aurat March* has continued to describe the generational shifts within the movement, **tracing its phases, progress, hurdles** and transformations often recurring to the "wave" metaphor (Saigol and Chaudhry 2020, Zia 2022; Batool and Malik 2021; Zubair 2022). Whether this provides us with an essential understanding of some of the main historical struggles led by women, this approach reproduces a linear narrative which fails to foreground the complex, heterogenous experiences of the protagonists leading these cultural and political transformations. In this chapter I seek to examine how these shifts have been understood, felt and narrated by the *Aurat March* volunteers themselves, centering on the production of cultural and political memory. For this purpose, the chapter seeks to explore the making of **feminist genealogy by foregrounding how the sense of legacy** is produced within performances, **practices, and representations** by *Aurat March* volunteers, particularly in relation to the resistance of Women's Action Forum's elder women.

The emergent field of anthropology of political movements has deployed the concept of "protest aesthetics" (McGarry et al 2020) or "political aesthetics" (Sartwell 2010; Werbner et al 2014) to explore how people produce creative alternative spaces to engage with politics in public space. McGarry (2020) has described protest aesthetics, more precisely, "the visual and performative elements of protest, such as images, symbols, graffiti, art, as well as the choreography of protest actions in public spaces" (19). This scholarship has repositioned the category of "aesthetics" beyond its traditional rationalist and positivist association with beauty, taste or value, employing it instead as

a lens to analyse and interpret contentious politics. In the introduction of their book, McGarry et al. argued that, rather than describing what is pleasing, aesthetics refers to “a range of performances” (17) central to political life, and shifts attention to social actors’ practices and meanings through which they communicate ideas, negotiate visibility, and mobilize. Scholarly work in this area foregrounds how the “spontaneous, experimental, improvisational” character of this “performative aesthetics” (Werbner et al., 2014, 9) plays a central role in providing substantive meanings and creative expressions for participants in political demonstrations, while also fostering new modes of mobilization and solidarity. Research on cultural expression embedded in politics highlights the expressive, embodied and performative elements of protest not merely for their intended explicit political message, but by foregrounding how they serve as sites for collective emotional resonance and social transformation. Situating *Aurat March* within the analytical framework of political aesthetics shifts attention away from conventional markers of political expression, such as speeches and verbal declarations, as well as those on which major attention has been put, such as slogans and placards. Instead, it draws focus on the ways in which performative acts, songs, poetry recitations operate as “affective or performative arenas activating political subjectivity in their own terms” (Salih and Richer-Devroe 2014, 12). This perspective highlights how embodied, creative and improvisational dimensions of the movement become central sites for collective meaning-making, emotional resonance and social transformation.

The centrality of embodied forms of actions in the context of political demonstrations has been central in **Judith Butler’s** study on performativity within forms of assemblies and gatherings in her work *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015). As she argued: “Political meanings enacted by demonstrations are not only those that are enacted by discourse, whether written or vocalized”, but rather, collective political action is produced through “forms of embodied and plural performativity” (8) foregrounding the centrality of coordinated and collective bodily expression rather than individual performance or intent. This collective dimension of political action is crucial: performativity emerges in a relational space between bodies acting together, which she calls space of appearance, constructed by plural forms of agency and social practices of

resistance. As she explains: “this parking of my body in the middle of another’s action, is neither my act or yours, but something that happens by virtue of the relation between us, arising from that relation, equivocating between the I and the we” (9). The concept of embodied intersubjectivity in which political meanings are articulated provides a useful lens to explore the space created within volunteers’ bodily performances, particularly in relation with Women’s Action Forum’s senior women. Performance, conceived as a system of embodied transmission, enables memory to be enacted, reactivated and circulated through gesture, movement, voice, and co-presence. In this framework, the relational space of appearance theorized by Butler intersects with the idea of embodied transmission: collective action not only produces political meaning in the present but also participates in the ongoing constitution of memory and historical continuity.

This centrality of bodily performativity and embodied forms of action is analyzed in the chapter in relation to the process of cultural memory formation and feminist legacy-making. To develop my argument I draw on Diana Taylor’s concept of **repertoire** (2003), which foregrounds embodied performance as “a system of learning, storing, and transmitting knowledge” (16). These become particularly significant in contests shaped by violence, censorship, and repression, where written or other documented forms of knowledge and memory may be fragmented, monitored or suppressed. According to the author, performance operates not merely as expression, but as mode of historical transmission: a corporeal form of knowledge through which memory is enacted and reactivated in the present. In her work *“The Archive and the Repertoire. Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas”* (2003), Taylor delineates a key distinction between two modes of cultural memory: the *archive*, comprising enduring materials such as documents, texts but also all archaeological remains, films, buildings, and all items that physically resist change. The second is the *repertoire*, which she describes as the embodied and lived practices: rituals, dances, singing, speeches, gestures and orality, and all those acts which embody what is thought as ephemeral and non-reproducible knowledge. As she stresses, this distinction is not based on written/oral language, but rather on the modes of transmission, as the repertoire transmits embodied actions, through live bodily enactments. It follows that repertoire requires the presence of the

people participating in the reproduction and transmission of knowledge. In this view, the author suggests that performances function as both praxis and epistemes, as a way of knowing, allowing for keeping as well as transformations of meanings.

Focusing on repertoires of embodied practices as an important system of knowing and transmitting knowledge allows for an alternative perspective on historical process, through which is possible to remap connections, encounters, shifts, physical and cultural barriers. Within this framework, Taylor conceptualizes the notion of scenario to account for the structuring logics that underlie the enactment of repertoires. Scenarios can be understood as “meaning-making paradigms” (28), that organize the conditions of performances and shape the possibilities through which memory becomes intelligible in situated acts. Scenarios encompass the “milieux and corporeal behaviours such as gestures, attitudes and tones not reducible to language” (Ibid): the physical location, the embodiment of social actors, the multiplicity of forms of transmission (dance, singing, narration, recitation etc) as well as the relationship across different actors and the spectators. In other words, scenarios provide the organizing frame that renders repertoires legible and meaningful. In the context of *Aurat March*’s performances, repertoires and scenarios constitute an important analytical lens through which to examine what kinds of meanings are produced, how they circulate across individuals and collectives, and in what ways embodied practices, collective memory and intergenerational knowledge are enacted, negotiated, and sustained within the space of the march and in parallel, less visible spaces that are generated in this process.

In the following pages, I analyze how cultural memory, enacted through embodied performances such as songs, poetry, chants, and dances, emerges in volunteers’ narratives. Drawing on interviews with volunteers positioned differently in relation to past struggles, some with prior involvement in feminist or leftist collectives before the *Aurat March*, others newly encountering these histories, and some largely unfamiliar with the earlier women’s movements, I explore how feminist legacies are produced through their narratives, representations, and performances across marches and other intergenerational encounters.

4.2 Performing Legacies: Dance as Political Memory



Fig. 21: Women's Action Forum and some volunteers dancing at *Aurat March* Lahore. March 8, 2019
Source: *Aurat March Lahore* Facebook.⁸⁸

4.2.1 “Dance to *karnā zarūrī thā!*”⁸⁹

March 2018 witnessed for the first time the convergence of various women-led collectives and organizations in Lahore who, under the call of collective “Hum Auratein” (We, The Women) took the streets in response to the rising momentum of #MeToo, which had opened unprecedented cathartic and confessional spaces, both offline and online, for “the collective expression of trauma” (Cheema 2023). The #MeToo movement allowed many young women survivors, including some future *Aurat March* volunteers such as Dua, introduced earlier, to speak up and name violence rather than relying on societal or institutional validation. In doing so, they unveiled the systemic nature of harassment while building networks of support and solidarity. In Pakistan, #MeToo played an important role in promoting conversations around sexuality, bodily

⁸⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=591743531301112&set=a.591743164634482>

⁸⁹ “It was necessary to dance!” (Hadiqa, April 27, 2023).

autonomy and gendered violence that had been considered taboos till that moment (Dad and Khan 2021), creating spaces through which women could meet, connect, and find trusted allies for the first time. However, it was the year 2019 which marked the launch of the first organized *Aurat March*, where activists drew a political manifesto and claimed the streets of Lahore in conjunction with the International Women's Day (Saigol 2019). The event was a resounding success, drawing families alongside groups of women and men of diverse ages, and was characterized by an atmosphere of joy, excitement, and collective energy. The day featured a structured program of speeches, performances, and a march culminating at Al-Hamra, a historically renowned center hosting musical, literary, and cultural festivals and exhibitions catering to the upper-middle-class. It was in the gardens of this venue that senior activists from Women's Action Forum spontaneously broke into dancing and singing, creating an unexpected moment of collective expression (Figure 21). Hadiqa, one of the march's early organizers, told me that since 2019 joining those spontaneous dances with WAF and *Aurat March* had been "her favourite highlight" (Hadiqa, April 27, 2023). Hadiqa, a lawyer and university professor in her early thirties, would often reach Egerton Road accompanied by a group of male and female lawyer colleagues to join her friends and *saathis* (companions) in her court attire. Since I first met her, she had also consistently attended the march by wearing the yellow *dupatta* (scarf), the symbol of Women's Action Forum, which in the last years she had started engaging with. She remembered the event in 2019 with great excitement, and particularly the moment in which senior women erupted during the program and took the space in joyous dances:

"In 2019 there was a lot of this joy, I couldn't believe there were so many women out on the streets and I was omg this is historical, things are going to change in Pakistan! There are so many people on the streets... And we just danced right away! That was the year when all the elder WAFers danced and it was just my most beautiful memory! Because you had Farida Shaheed who was on a wheel chair and she got up from one of her legs and she tried to hop and enjoy the dance! And I have never seen Hina Jilani dance. She is a very intimidating serious woman, and then there was Rubina Saigol (...) she was like the bhāḍ [jester], self professed bhāḍ of WAF, so she is super funny and her energy is just infectious and I remember after the dance she was... She is diabetic, and she was 'Aeee aeee sāns char gayā! Sāns char gayā! Bahut dance kar kiyā, bahut dance kar liyā, lekin dance to karnā thā! Dance to karnā zarūrī thā!' (she laughs). So that moment was just so beautiful and I think that was beautiful for the WAFers as well, because for so long they have been wondering where are the young feminists, and are we the only one? And suddenly they knew 'oh nono they are here, very much here!'" (Hadiqa, April 27, 2023)

Hadiqa describes in rich detail the moment during the first *Aurat March* when dance became a central affective mode of feminist expression. The unexpected sight of senior activists dancing turned into an unprecedented moment in which senior women simultaneously challenged both their physical limitations and the societal boundaries restricting women's expression. Raising their arms towards the sky, dancing in circles, WAF women were dancing on the notes of old songs which had been played in numerous events of the organization. Through the collective dance, volunteers witnessed and joined a historically sedimented form of resistance, which had been part of WAF culture of gathering in cultural programs (*jalsas*) and events. Seen from Taylor's framework (2003), dance operated as a **repertoire** reproducing a certain cultural memory and forms of resistant identities, enacted through gestures, rhythms, steps, and collective presence. Senior women rising from wheelchairs to sway or hop on one leg, as Hadiqa noted, abandoned solemnity to join the spontaneous choreography of bodies dancing despite age and fatigue. Rubina Saigol's remark, "dance to karnā zarūrī thā", as Hadiqa recalled, underscored how dance, in that moment, operated as a potent signifier of political participation and visibility. It created a space in which women could assert and reclaim both the physical sites they occupied and the expressive forms through which they situated themselves within the movement and the broader society.

The dance also transmitted an atmosphere of playfulness, fun, and frivolousness. Hadiqa, by using the word *bhāḍ* [jester] to depict one of the dancers, framed the moment of collective insurgence with a sense of irreverence and playful defiance, similarly to the one that will be articulated some years later with the *tappay*, discussed in the previous chapter. In the cultural landscape of Punjab, the *bhāḍ* refers both to a caste and to a distinctive performative figure devoted to entertainment and satire, one who mocks well-known characters and deploys humor, farce, and parody to engage the audience. Similar, as Hadiqa noted, to the court jesters of old traditions:

"They (bhāḍ) make criticism as part of their role—like in the European courts, where jesters could make fun of the king, right? That was the only transgression that allowed you to mock people in positions of power and get away with it... the bhāḍ is able to do that as well!"

Playfulness and irreverence framed the expression of women's resistance to patriarchy and the whole society also as a practice disrupting and disrespecting norms of morality and decorum and subverting the gendered hierarchies inscribed on women's bodies.

4.2.2: Encountering Past Resistance

Similarly to Hadiqa, Dua, introduced in the previous chapter, recalls the image of WAF women joyously dancing on the streets as a **core emotional memory** she shares with other *Aurat March* organizers who were present in that space that year:

"We have learnt by looking at WAF members, from the older feminists. And looking at how they were at the march. For many of us... One of our first memories, and one of the sweetest memories about the first march was looking at this bunch of old women, white headed, dancing around! And we were like: 'Ok we are not... We are not the crazy ones here! And it is okay to be like us. To resist, to be on the streets, to fight for it!'. So that gave a lot of us courage! And all of these ideas started getting stronger, and stronger in every march". (Dua, August 5, 2024)

For both Dua and Hadiqa, the performance constituted a moment **of mutual recognition**. The presence and embodied expression of senior feminists operated as a moment of identification through which younger volunteers could reconfigure their struggle and situate it within a broader sedimented trajectory of women's resistance. From the volunteers' perspective, the encounter affirmed their belonging to an ongoing struggle ("We are not the crazy ones here! It is okay to be like us!" - Dua, Ibid.), while at the same time, WAF women recognized that they were no longer alone: younger feminists were, as Hadiqa recalled "here, very much here (Hadiqa, Ibid.). The emotional intensity of this encounter, catalyzed by the euphoric collective dance, brought different subjectivities into alignment. As Sara Ahmed observed, emotions "align individuals with communities – or bodily space with social space – through the very intensity of their attachments" (2001, 11). In this context, spontaneous dances mediated the formation of such attachments, enabling affective intensities to be shared, acknowledged and rendered politically meaningful. Through this embodied alignment, a sense of feminist legacy emerged, not as abstract inheritance, but as a newly experienced, lived

continuity. In retrospect, Dua describes WAF's presence and expression as a moment of **"learning"**, insisting that "we learnt by looking at WAF members, at how they were at the march" (Dua, Ibid.). This learning emerged through co-presence and witnessing the repertoire enacted by WAF members, seeing them unapologetically occupying the streets, and expressing defiance through joy, giving them "courage" about how "to fight", "to resist" and imagine future marches (Ibid.). The act of seeing, of being physically present and observing their gestures, moments, energy, became itself a mode of transmission, where learning occurred through embodied exposure. Drawing from Butler, this recognition of each other's presence and interconnection within a newly created political space unfolds within a "space of appearance" constituted by the encounter of a plurality of bodies. Within this relational space, political meanings and performative actions are articulated between bodies. As she argues, "the action emerges from the 'between', a spatial figure for a relation that both binds and differentiates" (77). Lubna, another of the earliest volunteers of the march, similarly emphasizes the affective and imaginative force of that memory:

*"That is the first time where I actually saw all of them together... And there is a song, 'Tana Bana' ... And that is the first time I heard that. I hear and see them dancing rejoicing! I think for everyone, 2019 is one of the most memorable marches. **We all go back to that and I think somewhere deep inside we always try to recreate that! And I think more than anything is a feeling... You know, because it was the first time and also celebrating with them. I see them celebrate (...)** You kind of see where your future is. Like you see, it is so obvious that this is where you are gonna be in a few years! So to keep that so much alive and still have so much fire... Of course it is inspiring! So of course a lot of our inspiration comes from them and every time we discuss, we do discuss everything with them.. get together.. point of view to, you know... it comes from them!" (Lubna, March 19, 2024)*

For Lubna, 2019 remained the most memorable march precisely for the feeling she experienced through that embodied encounter: seeing senior activists gathered and dancing, hearing their songs, and participating in that shared joy for the first time. The spontaneous performance was relevant for its affective intensity, as she said: "more than anything, a feeling" which was central in the way organizers would in the following marches "always try to recreate" (Ibid.). Lubna had been one of the women who, during that period, publicly spoke out as part of Pakistan's #MeToo movement and consequently became one of the main targets of intense media backlash. For this

reason, encountering that intergenerational collective joy and togetherness acquired a particular significance to her, offering a way to collectively withstand the social hostility directed toward women at the time. As Lubna reflected, the feelings generated by that embodied experience offered more than momentary affect, but provided a lens through which volunteers could envision and desire to be within a continuing feminist trajectory. Seen from Butler's lens, the relational space "in between" senior and younger bodies, brought into being through collective bodily presence, dances and songs, shaped the conditions for mutual recognition and the articulation of political meanings.

During the fieldwork I conducted on the day of the march between 2022 and 2024, these "spontaneous" performances had become integral part of the script in which the *Aurat March* was carried out, beside the structured interventions enacted by different women and trans artists from the stage. At times, WAF members initiated dances that younger volunteers joined, particularly old songs considered core part of their repertoire, such as the one Lubna mentioned, *Tānā Bānā (Daryā kī Qasam)*. In other moments, *Aurat March* volunteers themselves began dancing independently and, increasingly, collective dancing circles formed as integral rituals, particularly as closing moments, during which Iqbal Bano's redemption of *Hum Dekhenge* was played. Through this reiteration, dance came to signify not merely celebration but also a historically situated mode of feminist expression, a culminating act of public presence. Drawing from Taylor, those performances that were re-enacted by *Aurat March* in the following years unfolded a structured scenario composed of intergenerational gatherings, spontaneous occupation of public space, circling dancing bodies, and the enactment of joy and celebration as expression of public dissent. Within this scenario, the repertoire of performances became signified and framed as an enactment/expression of feminist resistance, agency as well as legacy. From this first encounter occurred at the *Aurat Marches* and narrated in volunteers' accounts, legacy does not take the form of a static transmission of the past. Rather, it unfolds as a dynamic process shaped through the interplay of embodied participation and reenactment. It materializes as an embodied and relational experience that both reconfigures volunteers's imagination and practices, enacting specific forms of memory, knowledge, and political subjectivities. Within the

space of *Aurat March*, dance was apprehended as politically meaningful, resonating its earlier deployment by WAF while simultaneously consolidating a new scenographic framework of feminist cultural memory and collective expression.

4.2.3 From State Repression to Moral Outrage

*“The **khuṣī kā izhār**... it is also joy at the fact that.. you know I was 35 years old, now I am 77... So I was 35 years old when... **We broke the barriers**, we broke the cordon... On 12th of February... And we danced on Mall Road! (...) And it just turned into this... Something bent up... That needed to break! And so it was a feeling of immense liberation... Because there was the *chādhār* and the *chārdivārī*... And you know I work in education so for me one could see it tightening... Tightening about how women and men would **express themselves**, but particularly women. And so this sort of **eruption** onto the street... Was just the best feeling! (...) From the first conference that we had of WAF **we chose to always express ourselves through song and dances**. It was a decision... It was the way **we knew how**... Because we were not going to give lengthy speeches, obviously we spoke... **So it was through a lot of poetry. It was through a lot of singing, collective singing you know which is very much part of our culture**. And it is also because singing and dancing had been banned under Zia Ul Haq! So as many years ago.. In that year... We chose to express ourselves in that particular fashion (Samina Rahman, February 26, 2024)*

WAF member Samina Rahman, recalling WAF historic protest against Zia’s Law of Evidence along the same streets where they would have later danced in the first *Aurat March*, described the dances as a *khushi ka izhār* [expression of happiness], a visceral eruption of joy. Beyond this, Rahman emphasizes that from WAF’s very first conference, there was a collective decision to make dance, poetry, and songs central to their political practice, using them as deliberate acts of resistance against Zia’s prohibition on artistic and cultural expressions. Dance, both spontaneous and staged, has historically been a central practice through which WAF articulated its politics as a form of cultural resistance, particularly during Zia’s military dictatorship. As earlier discussed, the regime not only constrained women’s bodily autonomy and mobility (encapsulated in the concept of *chāḍar aur chardivārī*), but also imposed strict censorship on artistic and cultural expression. Visual and performative arts, including dance, were often framed as immoral or un-islamic, with theatre discouraged and dance, explicitly banned, as noted by Karachi-based performer and WAF member Sheema Kirmani (1995, 110).

In subsequent years, performers such as Sheema Kirmani in Karachi emphasized dance and other performative arts as disruptive and transformative tools within

upper-middle-class feminist frameworks. In her 1994 intervention at the “A Celebration of Women” conference organized by ASR, she highlighted the political and affective power of embodied performance.

Since its creation in 1981, WAF organized *jalsas*, “something between a really and a meeting with a celebratory element” (Shaheed 2023, 177), underscoring the centrality of cultural expression (performances such as skits, poetries, dances, theatre plays) to articulate dissent and resist authoritarianism. The emotional power and communicative effectiveness of this local, culturally resonant form of expression of dissent has been pointed out in many accounts by WAF members (Haroon 2005, Shaheed 1984), who documented how these were recorded in video-cassettes and played in different contexts and gatherings to reach out to many women. Over time, performative arts and dance, in particular, emerged as a central disruptive and transformative tool within the space of upper middle class feminist theorizations. As performer Sheema Kirmani noted, in her intervention at the Conference “A Celebration of Women” organized by ASR⁹⁰ in 1994:

*“The ruling authorities in Pakistan view **theatre and the arts as subversive of the social order**. This is precisely why they are important because an oppressive order needs to be subverted. In our own context, **dance is considered a particularly subversive form**. But this is where its power lies. It is up to us to use this power.” (1995, 59)*

Even before the creation of WAF in 1981, performance had been a vital medium of political expression, often intertwined with theatre as a tool for social change. In 1979, at the onset of Zia’s regime, Sheema Kirmani founded *Tēhrīk-e-Niswan*, a women’s group in Karachi that used street theatre in public spaces to address gender and political issues. Within the articulation of the women’s movement, such performances were crystallized as embodied acts of feminist resistance, articulating strength and agency in direct response to Zia’s repressive anti-art policies of the late 1970s and 1980s, and afterwards as part of their identity politics. Elsewhere, Kirmani wrote:

⁹⁰ Applied Socio-Economic Research (ASR) Resource Centre, founded by WAF member Nighat Said Khan in 1983 and closed in 2023.

“This assertion of identity in dance is threatening to male ego which is accustomed to seeing women as objects and not the subjects of desire. Women are not expected to have an identity which is strong, complete and whole within itself because such an identity belies the myth of feminine weakness so necessary for the construction of masculine strength”. (1995, 112)

As Kirmani noted, dance as a form of resistance and self-assertion was seen as challenging and disrupting patriarchal structures seeking to regulate women's expressions by maintaining control over their bodily autonomy. During the 1990s, dance, as well as theatre, poetry and chants became integral to WAF's gatherings and conferences, a repertoire which would have been later brought into the first *Aurat March* and in the following years. While performances in public remained marginal, many WAF members managed to brought these within private spaces, mostly educational elite institutions⁹¹, private schools and colleges, where WAF women developed courses and extracurricular activities.

Today, while no longer confronting overt bans or state censorship of the arts, dancing in public spaces challenges the long-term socio-cultural effects of that repression which have been internalized in the society over decades. The unprecedented sight of senior women reclaiming joy and dancing freely, generated comparatively little moral outrage among male onlookers when related to the backlash faced by younger volunteers. Because of their seniority, WAF women were less subject to sexualization in comparison to women and other gender minorities, such as *khwāja-sīrās* and queer people, who, in the following years, would undergo incessant media scrutiny, harassment and moral policing⁹². Their attire and their performances were marked by derogatory and moralizing remarks, with media anchors dismissing their calls for collective liberation labelling them as “girls dancing on roads” (Discover Pakistan 2024), wearing “behoda kapray” (indecent clothes) associating their dance with the “Mujra

⁹¹ A notable example is Lahore Grammar School (LGS), an institution founded by WAF member Samina Rahman and other women, where some courses and workshops also explore creative arts and pedagogies.

⁹² One of the key sites of contention surrounding the Aurat march was its alleged support for the LGBTQI+ subjectivities, an accusation that prompted volunteers in the year to enact a careful control of the slogans and the placards that participants would bring to the march. While the inclusion of *khwāja-sīrā* and trans identities, still heavily stigmatized by society, was framed as reflecting the indigenous histories and cultural specificities of the region, imagined references to LGBTQI identities were often used by media and religious right-wing to attack the march pointing at their promotion of unislamic western narratives.

Numa Dance” (RP Production 2022), referring to *mujrā*, a popular and stigmatized genre of erotic female dancing in Pakistan (Kirmani 2015). During 2023 *Aurat March*, tv channel Lahore Rang’s reporter, while zooming one of the performers singing on the stage, declared:

“Ab kaunsi āzādī ne chāhīye? Mujhe yahān pe objectivity kā muzāhira karnā chāhīye. Mujhe yahān par, ek biased opinion nahī denī chāhīye lekin being a Muslim, being a Pakistani, main yeh samajhtā hū ke agar āp is tarah ke tarīqon se woh āzādī māṅgeṅge jo moral hisāb ko mil chukī hai, to merā khayāl hai āp isse koī khidmat nahī kar rahī hai aurat ko uskī.” (Lahore Rang 2023)⁹³.

Such discourses situate women’s bodily expression within longstanding political-religious narratives in which women’s bodies serve as symbolic markers of morality tied to a “Muslim Pakistani” identity, reflecting the enduring imprint of Zia-era Islamization on gendered societal norms and roles. Over the past decades, the rise of **islamic revivalism and practices of “personalized piety”** (Maqsood 2017) have significantly shaped the sensibilities of various strata of the Punjabi upwardly middle class, fostering a gravitation toward conservative Wahabi-inspired norms and emphasis on personalized piety, a trajectory initially promoted during Zia’s Islamization. As noted by Shehribano Zia (2009, 2020), for a growing number of women adhering to these practices translated to an active participation in piety- and faith-based movements, through which they framed their political agency through religious norms and moral frameworks. Within this context, the severe backlash against *Aurat March* volunteers’ performances, the characterization of participants as, drawing from Zia, “cultural assassins of Pakistan” (Zia 2022), can be understood as part of a broader continuum, reflecting the intensified politicization of piety and gendered moral policing in the Country, and in particular in the urban Punjabi society.

⁹³ “What kind of freedom do they want now? I should maintain objectivity here. I should not give a biased opinion, but as a Muslim, as a Pakistani, I understand that if you demand freedom through methods that have already been morally accounted for, then in my opinion, you are not serving women in their rightful cause.”

4.3 Poetries as Vernaculars of Resistance: Re-establishing Historical Continuities

4. 3.1 WAF's anti-Zia Poetry

Over the years, *Aurat March* hosted a diverse array of spontaneous and staged performances, including poetry recitations, dances and musical interventions from artists across class, religious and gender minority communities, including trans and *khwāja-sīrā* individuals. Some of these performances explicitly referenced particular historical movements in the region, such as the left and the women's struggle, recalling their defiant and controversial characters as inspiring for the contemporary feminist movement. Shifting attention to their repertoires, I ask which memories and resistant subjectivities are evoked and enacted, and what they reveal about shifting configurations of power. Which histories, identities and historical trajectories are activated, reinterpreted and reproduced through their enactments?

The *ghazal* '*Hum Dekhengay*', composed in 1979 by the communist poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz, became a recurring feature of the *Aurat March* over the years. While in the initial years of the march the *ghazal* was performed by artists from the stage, during my fieldwork in 2023 and 2024 it was played in its recorded rendition by Iqbal Bano, marking the closing sequence of the march. In 2023, as the event's end was announced from the stage, the *ghazal* began, accompanying different movements: while the crowd gradually dispersed, volunteers gathered together and reassembled near the stage, starting dancing on the melody in a loose circle. At that point, I also joined them, leaving the camera I had used to record the day. As the rhythm intensified, some volunteers stepped into the center of the circle, dancing freely or spinning around as in local ways, while others collectively chanted the song's verses, which declared the triumph over oppression: *jab zulm-o-sitām ke koh-e-gīrān roṭī kī tarah ud jāēge, hum dekhenge!*⁹⁴. In that moment, the powerful slogan "*inqalāb zindābād*" emerged from the recorded tune, enhancing the joy and trepidation of the volunteers. As the melody concluded, we clapped and embraced one another, rejoicing for the successful completion of the event.

⁹⁴ "When the enormous mountains of tyranny will blow away like cotton, we will witness!"

The exuberance that ended the march reflected the exhausting contestations that volunteers had to face to hold the event that year, including the city authority's warnings urging the organisers to cancel the rally, denying the permit to march citing "security concerns, threats alerts, controversial cards and banners for awareness of women's rights" as well as the reservations expressed by "general public and religious organizations especially *Jamā'at-e-Islāmī*" (Butt 2023)⁹⁵. The satisfaction also derived from the fact that the previous year the march had not reached its scheduled conclusion, as it was interrupted by a mob of men of *Jamā'at-e-Islāmī* who disrupted the barricades and attacked the marchers, forcing them to disperse midway (AFP 2022). In this context, the performances' joy was experienced as an act of endurance and resilience of the volunteers in reclaiming public space. At the same time, the significance of *Hum Dekhenge* in this scenario rested on its historical role as an act of women's defiance against patriarchal power. As previously noted, Iqbal Bano's 1985 performance, conducted at Al Hamra in open defiance of General Zia-UI-Haq's ban on musical and other forms of cultural expressions deemed un-islamic, publicly asserted women's capacity for political agency and cultural resistance. Importantly, it demonstrated how art, culture, and performance could serve as central forms of women's resistance, successfully challenging authority and asserting presence in public life. By collectively singing and dancing on the *ghazal*, *Aurat March* volunteers therefore did not merely commemorate this earlier act of defiance, but they actively claimed it, linking it to their own aspirations, visions and desires for structural feminist transformations.

Through their re-enactments, *Aurat March* brought the fierce openly oppositional character of the resistance against Zia's dictatorship into the contemporary political arena. This was particularly evident in the choice of performances that *Aurat March* included in its program which had been performed by WAF in protests and demonstrations across the 1980s, many of which were poetry recitations. As pointed out by Kalra and Butt (2019) poetry had been a central tool of articulation of resistance in

⁹⁵ Later the objection was overturned by Lahore High Court, granting the permission to march and the city's duty to provide security (AFP 2022)

this period of Pakistan's history. Among these, volunteers brought to life compositions originally performed during the historic 12 February 1983 WAF-led protest, where 300 women mobilized against the proposed Law of Evidence which sought to curtail the legal status of women. Feminist poet Kishwar Naheed's *Hum gunāhgār auratē* ("We, Sinful Women"), first recited during the historical day, was performed during *Aurat March*, asserting women's refusal to submit to social, political and cultural constraints imposed by a deeply unequal patriarchal system:

"Ye ham gunāhgār auratē haĩ
jo ahl-e-jubba kī tamkanat se na ro' b khāē
na jān becē
na sar jhukāē
na hāth joṛē"⁹⁶

Kishwar Naheed's poetry had been for many years the "feminist rallying cry" (Shah, 2021,150) of WAF, for whom the author wrote and recited poetry in regular meetings and events. However, when the *Aurat March* started in 2019, Naheed expressed critical views on some of the slogans and placards shown up in the marches, arguing that feminists should remain mindful of cultural and traditional frameworks to avoid straying into extremes (Dawn 2019). This instance shows how feminist expressions can be sites of intergenerational self-policing and critique, pointing at how political sensibilities and frameworks change across generations.

In 2024, Tahira Jalib performed the poetry "Ab dehr mē be-yār o madadgār nahĩ ham" ("Now, we are no longer helpless in this place") written by her late uncle, the Urdu leftist poet Habib Jalib and similarly recited during the historical protest (leading to his arrest). The poem, as WAF member Farida Shaheed wrote (1984), was later reperformed at WAF's first-anniversary *jalsa*, eventually becoming the official Women's Action Forum anthem. Similarly to *Hum Dekhenge*, the powerful and evocative language of this poetry, such as "ẓulm-o-karam" (oppression and cruelty) or "jor-o-sitam" (force and

⁹⁶ "It is we sinful women
who are not awed by the grandeur of those who wear gowns
who don't sell our lives
who don't bow our heads
who don't fold our hands together."

tyranny) imbued *Aurat March* with a political imagination of resistance bearing witness and prevailing injustice. During one of the early marches, singer and volunteer Tuba performed another Habib Jalib's poem, "Zulm rahe aur aman bhī ho" (Is peace possible while oppression exists), accompanied by performer A.K. For Tuba, introducing this poetry into the space of the *Aurat March* was a means to actively confront the forgetting of past resistance of the women and the left movement, a process that occurred also with the insurgency of right-wing religious influence in the country. When I met her in the campus of the university where she taught, she told me:

"We had a rupture, a great rupture in terms of our memory of resistance, memory of political organizing, memory of the left. and being acquainted with Pakistan's very very of rich history of left wing struggle and this is not a place that it was the way it is now, there were very strong organized, leftist and communist labor trade unions, student movements here. So when I choose to sing, one part, what informs my repertoire, I am deeply interested in reviving history of left wing and anti-colonial movements that have been forgotten in the mainstream. And I thought that Jalib is very very evocative and useful for that. It is also a connection to the 80s, to his association with WAF and the first women's movement." (Tuba, March 1, 2023)

For Tuba, "reviving the history" did not merely evoke a past moment, but addressed a "great rupture" in collective memory and created a connection between that past and the current women's movement. Significantly, their struggle had to be seen in its broader political landscape, where leftist movements, students organizations and laborers had been equally suppressed by the military regime. Her performance, therefore, did more than accompany political claims, but constructed a space that embodied a continuity rooted in shared specific historical consciousness of resistance. As she explained:

*"Singing it [the poem] now in Aurat March **was drawing a connection between now, locating now in the longer history of Pakistani political resistance.** So I think that is why it is important to go back." (Tuba, March 1, 2023)*

In this sense, by performing compositions such as *Hum Dekhenge* and the poetry of Habib Jalib and Kishwar Naheed, I argue that volunteers did not merely evoke the memory of past resistance, but they actively presented a critical reflection on women's struggles as lived realities that were partially erased from collective memory and required active recognition and incorporation into the present women's movement. From this perspective, these embodied enactments did not operate merely as references, but

as mechanisms for establishing historical continuities in women's (and leftist, as Tuba points out) cultural resistance of the Zia era and contemporary mobilizations, highlighting simultaneously historical discontinuities and the desire to reconnect.

4.3.2 *"I am protesting in the way our ancestors protested!"*

"And that was my introduction to feminism when I was in grade 8, Punjabi literature! That is where I knew... What feminism is, and who I am, and where I come from." (Heer, September 12, 2023)

"Ē kēṛhā aini?" (Who are you?). Heer and A. started walking in the space inside a circle that had been formed for the performance, surrounded by participants of the *Aurat March* who stood watching the scene in silence. Moving slowly at a distance from one another, they took turns addressing the crowd, repeatedly asking: "Ē kēṛhā aini?" (Who are you?). Gradually, they approached and reached in front of each other, repeating one more time while increasing the intensity of their voices: "Ē kēṛhā ain?"

Suddenly, opening their arms, they reached each other's backs and embraced them, as they recited in a heartbreaking tone of lament: Ē kēṛhā ain, Ve kēṛhā ain meriyā āndrā nāl manji undā? (Who are you, weaving my bed with my insides?). Holding each other's hands for support, they arched their bodies backward, with their faces in opposite directions, completing the line in anguish. After a few seconds keeping that position, they separated again, A. clutched his chest and knelt before Heer, declaring: Mera dil dovā āle pāse rakheñ! (Place my heart at the foot), to which Heer, turning toward the crowd and raising her arms, responded: Te akhā sarhāne bane!" (and my eyes at the head). Extending their arms toward one another in unison, they recited with a feeble smile: Main sarhāne phul kaḍhne nēñ! (I have to embroider flowers on the pillow!). The brief moment was disrupted when A. pushed Heer to the ground, from where she cried out in anguish: Dharti dī dhon nīvī hovē! (When the earth's neck is bowed). A., while climbing onto her back, repeated her words and completed the line: Te ohde te asmān nahī chakā devī dā⁹⁷! (You don't load the sky on it!) shouting it towards the crowd, who responded with applause and cheers.

⁹⁷ "Hey, who are you weaving my bed with my insides
Place my heart at the foot and my eyes at the head
I have to embroider flowers on the pillow
When the earth's neck is bowed
You don't load the sky on it"

The performance, which lasted nearly ten minutes, was an enactment of the Punjabi poem “Ē kēṛhā ain?” (Who are you?) written by feminist renowned poet and activist Nasreen Anjum Bhatti. Staged at the *Aurat March* by Heer and A., performers at feminist Punjabi street theater *Sangat*⁹⁸, it presented a critique of the inequalities faced by girls in a male-dominated society disciplining their lives, aspirations and desires. In the performance, a daughter addresses her father, questioning the burden imposed on her through marriage. The marital bed becomes the place where her *āndrā*, her inner emotions and feelings are woven into it, where her heart is suppressed and while her “eyes at the head”. The pillow where “the earth’s neck is bowed”, is being embroidered by her, a reference to the dowry, a practice that commodifies daughters within patriarchal family structures.

Nasreen Bhatti has been regarded as a central figure in Punjabi literature for articulating dissent against gendered-based oppression and the class-based politico-economic structure of the society, in particular during the dictatorship of Zia-UI-Haq. While, as discussed in the previous paragraph, Urdu poets like Faiz, Jalib and Naheed have been celebrated as central voices of cultural resistance against Zia, the **Punjabi literary production was marginalized under the banner of religious nationalism**. This process marginalized religious and ethnic minorities and suppressed regional linguistic and cultural forms across media, education, and governance. As argued by Malik (2025), “this period saw the rise of a state ideology that prioritised religious identity over ethnic and linguistic pluralism, leading to greater alienation among non-Urdu-speaking communities” which “led to a decline in regional literature and oral traditions” (78). Furthermore, as observed by Kalra and Butt (2019), the repression of regional languages and literary expressions was seldom acknowledged by segments of Urdu-speaking progressive elite, which in a way reproduced the regime’s ethnic hierarchies. Against this backdrop, *Sangat* theatre collective incorporated Bhatti’s and

⁹⁸ The collective’s founder, Huma Safdar, conceived Punjabi theatre as a political tool articulating critiques against Zia’s repressive politics, including the banning of arts, the persecution of minorities and the marginalization of regional languages. Theatre Collective Sangat adapts Punjabi literature and Punjabi epistemologies into theatre performances to familiarise contemporary audiences across urban centers and rural areas with their rich heritage. Differently from other Lahore based theater groups (Ajoka Theatre, Punjab Lok Raqs) Sangat centers more intimate narrations and deploys a feminist lens of the enactments (Butt 2024)

other Punjabi literary works into the public space of the *Aurat March*, framing them as relevant and constitutive of contemporary feminist politics, rather than as merely cultural references. Over the years, *Sangat* has become a recurring presence of the *March*'s political landscape, staging performances grounded in Punjabi literary and Sufi traditions, such as the *kalams*⁹⁹ and verses of poets such as Bulleh Shah and Waris Shah. The repertoires address gender and class exploitation under patriarchy, enacting selected verses or parts through gestures, voices and silences. For Heer, who became *Aurat March* volunteer after more than a decade of being engaged with *Sangat*, this convergence signaled not a coincidence, but continuity. The march, for her, was “in line” with the feminist *ethos* for which the theatre group “stood for”, expressing a similar denunciation of patriarchy across different periods of time. As she said to me, “everything that we have done until down through our performances has been directly in alignment with our views as feminist and what we want to talk about” (Heer, September 12, 2023). This “alignement” of Punjabi poetry and the *March* articulated a historical genealogy of feminist critique, where earlier traditions had already staged challenges to political and gendered domination. Within these texts, women often appear as active, brave agents confronting authority, destabilizing normative gender roles and expectations: “She is the one who challenges patriarchy, she is the one who stands up against the status quo, she is the one who raises her voice!” (Ibid.).

For Heer, performing these repertoires at the *Aurat March* reclaimed feminist resistance as indigenous to the land, rooted in local epistemologies, regional literary canons and longstanding philosophical traditions. Feminism did not construct something new, but has been embedded in the cultural history of Punjab, dismissing the charges that called it a foreign import by westernized women. As Charania (2014) observes, the rhetoric of Westernization has cast Pakistani feminists as un-Islamic “suspicious citizens” (326), illustrating how this discursive instrumentalization regulates not only sexuality, but also the boundaries of nationality. Citizenship, she notes, “is a narrative of belonging, but one in which feminist subjects have always been precariously positioned” (ibid.). Heer’s emphasis on the indigeneity of feminist thought offers a powerful counter-narrative to

⁹⁹ *Kalam* is a lyrical, often sung sufi poem expressing spiritual and philosophical ideas

this exclusionary framing. Recalling her own encounter with Punjabi literature, she described it as transformative: “that really was life changing for me, I was like oh I am not gonna take... You know, how feminism is explained in the West or whatever those movements were of whatever they stood for... **Because I have my own role models**” (Heer, September 12, 2023). In this sense, as she adds, the fight against gendered oppression is “something a person from my region wrote about in the sixteenth century”. At the same time, dance itself, accompanying poetry, is claimed again as a historically embedded practice through which past figures expressed resistance against authority:

*“When we are talking that Aurat March is a resistance movement, that is resistance, and that is not something that’s new! Bulleh Shah resisted in the same way, how he used to dance! You know he was a Syed, he came from the highest caste and the Islamic... He wasn’t allowed to dance because that was.. but as.. for showing his resistance that was also him **showing joy and resistance...** And that was through dance! Then Shah Hussain, Madhu Laal Hussain... He showed his resistance though dancing in the streets! And these people danced naked in the streets wearing ghungroo! Theek hai? So I am not doing anything new. I am protesting in the way our ancestors protested!” (Heer, September 12, 2023)*

Heer’s emphasis that volunteers are “not doing anything new” and they are “protesting the way our ancestors protested” traces a genealogy of embodied resistance grounded in continuity rather than rupture, where dance stands as an inherited repertoire of dissent re-activated across generations and making the present struggle an extension of the past one. At the same time, it highlights how the re-enactment or re-staging them assumes particular meaning as a practice of legitimization of resistance in the present context. Her reference to returning to “what we really were” further underscores this dynamic, where political repertoires are processes retrieving histories that have been marginalized, yet upheld the same values and critiques that contemporary feminist activism embodies. While this alignment reflects a shared feminist critique as well as mode of expressions, it also revealed tensions and frictions around its reception and accessibility. Repertoires in fact do not simply reproduce cultural imaginaries, stories, memories, but these are actively received, interpreted, and embodied by the audience. Because much of the material relied on literary or classical Punjabi, it was only partially comprehensible to the *Aurat March* audience, whether being the majority of Urdu and English speaking upper-middle-class women, or Punjabi mother tongue speakers,

mostly from lower-middle-classes (as well as people heading from other provinces). By combining theatre and oral recitation, the performances highlighted a central tension: while these repertoires reproduce cultural histories and identities of resistance, they can simultaneously constrain understanding and circulation when linguistic registers do not align with social class, subjected to political transformations and temporal shifts. Therefore, in the context of *Sangat* performances at the *March*, Punjabi does not simply serve as a medium reclaiming the indigeneity of the feminist struggle, but also emerges as a lens into the ways language politics intersects with gendered, class, and ethnic dimensions of power and resistance.

4.4 Emergent generational Memories

Aiman Rizvi (2024) contends that, although Zia-era feminist uprisings laid important groundwork for the *Aurat March*, it would be misleading to trace the movement's "**cultural inheritance**" (179) directly back to that period, given the markedly different configurations of power and culture that shape both the periods. Indeed, *Aurat March* volunteers operated within a different socio-political milieu, and their politics was largely shaped by the convergence of small urban feminist groups, such as *Girls at Dhābās* and The Feminist Collective, alongside, as early pointed out, the #MeToo campaign. The activism of these groups focused on reclaiming public spaces, contesting gendered violence, and unfolded primarily on digital spaces, used for both awareness and mobilization. Nevertheless, Women's Action Forum, the major reference point when it comes to the history of women's upper-class movements in Pakistan, played a significant role in shaping the emerging *Aurat March*. In what follows, I examine how this process of cultural inheritance unfolded through the encounters between *Aurat March* and WAF, and how it contributed to shaping and "bridging the generational arc" (Khan 2021, 37) between the two in the years following the first march. To analyze this dynamic, I refer to Andrea Hajek's analytical distinction between social heritage and societal inheritance (2013; 2017) in feminist legacy-making. In Hajek's formulation, social heritage refers to a relatively stabilized and publicly recognized legacy, what is handed down by tradition, that has been sedimented through earlier negotiations and

exclusions, and institutionalized through archives, commemorations, media and cultural production. Social inheritance, by contrast, denotes the lived, relational process through which activists engage with that past in the present. It denotes the connection between the memories existing within the same generation and those produced in the encounter across them, where legacy emerges as contested, reworked, and made meaningful. As she writes, inheritance occurs when “memories existing among members of one generation (...) cross over with memories transmitted to and from other generations, and which are appropriated by those other generations” (2013, 229). Engaging with the idea of **inheritance** provides a way to move beyond linear historiographies, allowing instead an exploration of the intimate, affective, and epistemic dimensions through which feminist genealogies, and legacies, are imagined and reconstituted. Drawing in particular on the experience of Zoya, one of the first volunteers, also involved in prior feminist collectives, I examine how cultural memory has been reworked in the years following the *Aurat March*, particularly in relation to the generational boundaries that existed prior to 2019, and how these were renegotiated through intergenerational encounter.

4.4.1 Urban Transformations Before the March

In the years preceding the *March*, a number of feminist collectives began to emerge in urban centers, created by young women whose academic and professional trajectories had exposed them not only to feminist theory but also to different forms of mobility experienced abroad. In Lahore, young women active in initiatives and urban collectives such as *Girls at Dhābās*¹⁰⁰ and the more academically oriented The Feminist Collective¹⁰¹, were the first groups drawing attention to gendered experiences of public spaces, rearticulating feminism through the politicization of the personal and the expanded use of digital platforms.

Girls at Dhābās, started in 2015, addressed women’s mobility, safety, and access to public spaces, while framing leisure and loitering as legitimate feminist practices. By

¹⁰⁰ <https://girlsatdhabas.wordpress.com/>

¹⁰¹ <https://www.facebook.com/tfclahore>

claiming public spaces, such as streets, parks, and *dhabas*, the collective developed its feminist praxis through everyday acts of resistance and negotiation, reclaiming and inhabiting both digital and physical spaces, mapping women's belonging "across *dhabas* (tea stall) and Instagram posts" (Rizvi 2024,180). Digital spaces facilitated connections and solidarities with other South Asian feminist experiments (movements, collectives, and campaigns), creating spaces to share practices and exchange knowledge, raising awareness and cultivating feminist consciousness. These transformations in urban feminist praxis, analyzed over the past decade by Indian and Pakistani scholars such as Shilpa Phadke (2020) and Nida Kirmani (2020), created the conditions for women to connect and to recognize common experiences and aspirations. This emphasis on the personal as the foundation of feminist politics, combined with the simultaneous presence across multiple spatialities, gave rise to a new feminist praxis that would eventually inform and shape *Aurat March*. Before Instagram became the primary political terrain, particularly in *Aurat March*, feminist collectives used Tumblr and Facebook to assert visibility, document everyday resistance, and build communities of solidarity. Nevertheless, these collectives remained relatively small enclaves, bringing together limited circles of upper-class women and rarely intersecting with the spaces or discursive frameworks of senior activists.

Zoya, one of the members of *Girls at Dhābās* in Lahore, and later organizer at *Aurat March*, recalled that for many young women the internet constituted the primary space of "feminist formations" (Kamal 2024). Through social media, they encountered feminist ideas, connected with like-minded individuals, and organized public actions aimed at reclaiming the public spaces, such as collective bicycle rides, playing cricket in the streets and chatting over a cup of *chāi* in a local *dhaba* traditionally frequented by working- and middle-class men. This highlights a significant generational distinction in how different groups of women situated their exposure to feminism and its practices. Among young, urban, upper-middle-class women like Zoya, as said, political consciousness largely developed through online interactions and peer networks in digital spaces. As she articulated, "a lot of us came to feminism not because like my *ammi feminist thi* [my mom was a feminist]. It was mostly because *ham internet se*

sikhāyā [we learnt it from Internet]”. By contrast, older activists of the same class had grown up hearing firsthand accounts of senior women’s struggles during the Liberation Movement, sometimes within their own families, which directly shaped and inspired their political consciousness (Neelam Hussein, March 1, 2024). Zoya, in her early thirties at the time of my research, joined *Girls at Dhābās* together with a close friend in 2016–2017, shortly after returning from a master’s program abroad. During that time, she had developed a growing interest in feminist politics and was eager to recreate a connection with her hometown, renegotiating her relationship to it as a woman and a young adult. During this period, while establishing her professional career, she participated in few WAF meetings, aware of the organization’s historical significance. However, she recalled that her early experiences within WAF did not constitute a comfortable space. While her limited participation was partly due to scheduling work conflicts, her emotional disengagement stemmed from the perception that the concerns of younger women were often dismissed or undervalued by senior WAF members.

*“Initially I found WAF to be very **closed off and intimidating**. And kind of... As maybe when you are entering as a young person maybe you are not really sure of yourself, to.. You are entering this space that has its sort kind of dynamics wagherah (...) They were very **dismissive** at times and I saw all like in the room wo chuph karā rahē thē. For example [A].. **It was a very different pehle**. She was a lot meaner to people! And like shut the down wagherah! (she laughs) So I also heard from people who had not had a good experience so I was like this is not a space for me. So **that’s why I gravitated to more young collectives** where... *Girls at Dhaba... Aur like Aurat March*” (Zoya, March 19, 2024)*

In her research, conducted few years prior to the march (2017-18), Zainab Shumail examined women’s collectives’, including *Girls at Dhābās*, familiarity with the Women’s Action Forum (WAF), arguing that their different politics, compounded by generational divides, hindered the formation of a shared feminist praxis and cohesive agenda. Her work illuminated a discrepancy: despite the existence of extensive scholarly documentation on WAF’s contributions, WAF history had remained unknown to younger activists, and, when/if known, it mostly limited to the years of open street protest against the Zia-ul-Haq regime. Only in a few instances young women were acquainted with WAF’s work through professional engagements in organizations established by its members, or through family connections.

Aurat March Lahore was initially built by the convergence of women who had previously been active in collectives such as *Girls at Dhābās*, the Feminist Collective and leftist student organizations such as Progressive Students Collective (PSC), alongside women who were new to political organizing and had connected thought conversations generated by #MeToo. For some of them, the memory of the women's movement that had been canonized through archives, commemorations, videos and recordings, what Hajek (2013) calls "social heritage", was only partially known or, in some cases, totally unfamiliar. While this heritage was celebrated and commemorated through a series of events¹⁰², the documentation of earlier feminist work had remained largely confined to WAF's own initiatives and organizational activities. Beyond these spaces, WAF's archival record had been maintained in both physical and digital forms, including book publications and conference proceedings (Mumtaz and Shaheed 1987, Khan and Zia 1995; Khan, Saigol, Zia 1995; Khan 2018), videocassettes, recordings, and, more recently, websites and youtube channels¹⁰³ settled up by associations, resource centers and NGOs established by WAF activists themselves (such as Simorgh, ASR and Shirgat Gah). Beyond these spaces, however, access to such materials and therefore their histories (the "archival things," to borrow Taylor's term) was limited. As Hajek argued, the material or textual remediation of images, texts and narratives plays a central role in the production and circulation of cultural memory, enabling contemporary activists to engage with the past and shape collective identity. As WAF's documentation and production remained largely self-referential, circulating within the boundaries of its own events, cultural programs, conferences, anniversary commemorations, its cultural memory struggled to encounter the younger activists. On the other side, what Hajek referred as the societal inheritance, understood as the relational process in which cultural memory is transmitted, negotiated and reworked across generations, began to take shape in the aftermath of the first *Aurat March*, as activists became engaged in dialogue within a newly articulated shared space.

¹⁰² International Women's Day, for example, was one occasion in which such commemorations were held, albeit primarily within relatively private or enclosed spaces. Before *Aurat March*, it was celebrated on the 12th of February, on the recurrence of the anniversary of the WAF-led Lahore historical protest against the Law of Evidence on 12 February 1983). See:

<https://archive.lums.edu.pk/interactives/womens-action-forum/chapter3>

¹⁰³ See for example <https://www.youtube.com/@womensactionforumlahore5627>

4.4.2 Building a shared history

*“For me personally I drew a lot of **strength and inspiration** from those sorts of **historical examples** and what has come before. (...) And then I also, you know, as a movement and as a political project, I want to have **linkages** with **our predecessors** as well. And that is a very Lahore specific thing that you can draw a very generational boundary between WAF is older and Aurat March is newer. In other chapters it is a lot more intertwined and combined. I am like we want to link up with the **older chapter** because there is **continuity** in that, and **wisdom** in that... in **learning from that effort**” (Hadiqa, April 27, 2023)*

For Hadiqa, introduced at the beginning of the chapter, 2019 marked a shift in her approach to activism. While she had been aware of the Women’s Action Forum’s history and its activities in Lahore before, also due to her academic work, the emergence of *Aurat March* prompted her to engage more directly with WAF, seeing it not just as history but as a source of inspiration and strength and to connect across generations. In expressing a desire to develop new “linkages” with her “predecessors”, the “old chapter”, she underscored the need to bridge that “generational boundary” while simultaneously recognizing an inherent continuity across diverse feminist spaces and practices.

Shumail contended that the 2019 *Aurat March* created the conditions conducive to the formation of new alliances by framing the necessity of collectively responding to the intense backlash that followed the march, thereby mitigating pre-existing tensions and discomforts among the groups. Besides countering the backlash, in the aftermath of the march these groups increasingly convened organized meetings motivated by the desire to exchange knowledge, reimagine shared feminist practices and future trajectories. In the conversations I had with some volunteers, this generational boundary emerged not merely as a demographic fact, but also as a distance mediated by affective and emotional dynamics. Experiences of misrecognition and hesitation, and later admiration and curiosity, structured the ways in which volunteers positioned themselves in relation to senior women, and vice versa. In this sense, generational boundaries were both sustained and negotiated through emotional investments and affective dynamics. As Zoya reflected:

"I think at that time I had attended a few meetings as well where they were archiving and they were very aware of their own mortalities I think... that Lala Rukh had just died. Is tarah wagherah.. so I think they were realizing they were getting old and they don't have a lot of young members... And they are activists so of course they worry about what is the future of the movement... And then I think with Aurat March, they genuinely, especially in Lahore... I know there were hostilities and tensions in other cities but in Lahore after 2019 there was a lot of openness!" (Zoya, March 19, 2024)

In the years preceding the *Aurat March*, WAF founding members had articulated concerns about the lack of a cohesive women's movement and the absence of a shared vision for feminist resistance in Pakistan (Saigol 2016). The deaths of WAF founding member and artist Lala Rukh in 2017 (which would have been followed a few years later by educationist Rubina Saigol), also impacted their activism, as Zoya narrated, amplifying a sense of vulnerability. Within this context, *Aurat March* served both to inspire renewed hopes and to foster a sense of responsibility and active participation towards the movement among volunteers. Moreover, these encounters facilitated reciprocal reflections, allowing similarities and divergences to be voiced out and articulated, and helping to delineate the new group contours between older and young women. Zoya shared that:

*"They [WAF women] were very appreciative of the fact that topics we [WAF] had not talked about, they were like 'Mera jism, meri marzi [my body, my choice] it is a great slogan!' They were like 'Hum nahī kar sakē', Like the kind of **barriers that you have broken**... We had never talked about queerness or sexuality, even in indirect ways that you do. The ways that you do'. And the meetings that we had with them in that summer, we had like a bunch of dialogues with WAF, they were very open to like 'Accha tell us what social media is, tell us what intersectionality is', these kinds of things. **I guess like a new kind of feminism that is coming in** and what that means.. Also because of the '#me too' movement it was a big thing! So I think it was very complementary" (Ibid.)*

Discussions around issues that *Aurat March* had brought into the public space, such as queerness, intersectionality, and the use of social media for mobilization, became meaningful frameworks through which the two groups not simply came to know one another, but reshaped their practices and political vocabularies, traversing linguistic and epistemological boundaries. This process of "complementary" mutual learning disrupted rigid generational divisions and created space for collective re-creation of feminist politics. In 2020, when *Aurat March* presented its manifesto at the press conference ahead of the march, WAF members and AM activists stood together. Significantly, when

a media anchor questioned them about their controversial slogan, they collectively repeated it unapologetically and aloud for a few minutes, demonstrating how this embodied, performative politics had already been shared and collectively embraced (Wafa, 2020). For *Aurat March* volunteers, on the other hand, WAF has been a crucial source of political capital, offering guidance and knowledge drawn from decades of activism. This support extended across multiple domains: navigating legal challenges such as defamation or blasphemy cases, appealing against the city administration's annual rejection of NOCs (permission to march) and, more broadly, addressing the socio-political and legal obstacles encountered in organizing public protests.

In this process, WAF's canonized history of resistance, what Hajek (2013) conceptualizes as 'social heritage', including recordings, songs, oral histories, commemorations, became more widely known, referenced and mobilized by younger activists. Yet, most significantly, "societal inheritance" (Hajek 2013) came to the fore: the past struggle emerged as a living memory constituted through ongoing engagement. For younger generations, interaction with earlier feminist struggles was not about the transmission of a stabilized legacy; rather, it involved reanimating past practices and rendering them meaningful in a new political context. The musical repertoire of Women's Action Forum became embedded in the soundscape of *Aurat March*, women engaged in public discussions and sessions on specific topics, they issued joint statements that articulated shared demands and consolidated shared collective positions in the public sphere. In a few cases, contaminations were brought into personal initiatives and collaborations in their professional work. One of such, the podcast *Hum Gunahgar Auraten* (named after Kishwar Naheed's iconic poem), produced by the journalism platform *Lok Sujag* (2024), brought together women engaged in historical and contemporary women's struggles, situating present mobilizations within longer genealogies of feminist resistance in Pakistan.

Narratives shifted too: rather than being understood as two distinct urban collectives, each marked by its own focuses, practices, and histories, it increasingly came to be articulated as a unified movement rooted in shared experiences, overlapping constituencies and political affinities. This reconfiguration was reflected in scholarly

literature as well, which increasingly articulated the need to move from individual memories to a "collective history" and to seek "coherence across generations" (Rehman 2021, 2). What was initially articulated as a position of radical difference gradually evolved into an effort to identify common ground. The shift foregrounded shared positionalities, particularly as urban, educated, upper-middle-class women, and highlighted the convergence of their experiences. At the same time, these actors confronted similar structural and political challenges, navigating intersectional barriers, particularly across class and ethnicity, and responding to backlash from religious far-right groups. As Zoya reflected:

*"I think a lot of us realized that it [WAF] was very similar to Aurat Marchers, where they were... Unhōnē khud hī... nikāḥ cancel kar do, fatwā in ke khilāf lagā do, they were also very provocative like dupatta jalānā! Hum nahī sōch saktē haī yeh karnā hai! So I think when they saw in 2019 especially like.. they saw this and they were like "Acchā! You know hum bhī aisē thē! [Well! You know, we were also like this!] And yeah, there is that... **Invisible legacy.**" (Ibid.)*

WAF members came to recognize and validate *Aurat March* volunteers through a perceived sameness in struggle, particularly in the energy, courage, and defiant spirit embodied by the younger women. Once again, emotional and affective dimensions emerge as central to how women construct continuity and give meaning to a sense of legacy across generations. From this perspective, the evolving relationship between *Aurat March* and senior activists fostered **a new discourse of collective memory**. As Hemmings (2011) notes, legacy-making involves a process of narrative selection, wherein certain stories are privileged while others are marginalized. For instance, the 1984 WAF Lahore uprising against the Law of Evidence, already canonized in the history of the women's movement, became more consolidated in the collective memory of the younger generation, celebrated for its unprecedented impact and power. In contrast, experiences of activists with less cultural and material capital (from lower classes, ethnic or religious minorities) have often remained on the margins. For instance, as noted earlier, repertoires in Punjabi had historically been less visible or marginalized within urban, upper-middle-class feminist movements. Huma Safdar, founder of *Sangat*, reflected that performances in literary Punjabi have often not been fully embraced by the upper-class women's movement, except when they incorporated

elements of cultural expression or folk aesthetics that made the event more entertaining. Reflecting on WAF's past struggles, she told me:

*"Punjabi was accepted as a language where we can sing, dance... You know? In a cultural scenario it was in! Even for WAF, even for AM now. So in some way they wouldn't use... They don't think **it is intellectual enough**... And they don't have vocabulary... So they somewhere they accepted ... Accept us, WAF accepted us. They would just make us a little uncomfortable when we bring the class question a bit too strongly or... When we use a little heavy language. Punjabi. More solid Punjabi, more literary Punjabi, and they were like 'samajh nahī ātī... hamē nahī samajh ā rahī hai'... You know, it is too difficult. So that was the attitude but somewhere we were penetrating because we were very active!" (Huma, February 29, 2024).*

Such reflections suggest that while some struggles are celebrated and made part of a recognized feminist legacy, others continue to be only partially acknowledged and seldom fully integrated into collective memory. Overall, following Shama Dossa (2021), I contend that *Aurat March* acted as a transformative space of "feminist pedagogy" facilitating "transgenerational dialogue" (330), the sharing of knowledge and reflective practices, the cultivation of mutual support, and reworking of women's movement histories. In doing so, the formation of a shared legacy partially bridged generations boundaries and fostered new forms of collective political engagement and consciousness.

4.5 Voices of Legacy: Songs, Chants and Memory

4.5.1 Hearing Resistance

Over the three years of fieldwork, the march began from *Shimla Pahari*, a dusty road junction situated near offices and government buildings, next to the Lahore Press Club where the day before the press conference had taken place. We, as volunteers, had spent the morning setting up the art installations situated at the ending point of the march, about a kilometer from *Shimla Pahari*, where we had come back to wait for participants to reach. At around 2 pm, the crowds gradually assembled, mostly students from colleges, but also older people, workers, human rights advocates, lawyers, associations and professional groups, many coming from middle and upper-middle class

backgrounds. As we waited for the truck to arrive, a line of women holding numerous banners stood firmly at the front, beginning to chant slogans while Youtubers and media crews started filming and interviewing participants. *Jāgī Jāgī! Aurat Jāgī! Aurat tashaddud... Nā manzūr!* (“Awaken! Awaken! Women have awakened! Violence against women... is not acceptable!”). It was early afternoon, and as we chanted, the weight of the sun pressed upon us, with spring gradually giving way to the scorching heat of summer.

When the truck finally arrived, we fell in behind it, and as the music began the slogans subsumed into the rhythm. A rich soundscape accompanied the beginning of the march through Ergerton Road, where the music unleashed different emotional tunes, political messages, carrying the histories of different struggles, brought together in that space filled with around a thousand women. The anthem of the feminist socialist Women Democratic Front (WDF) was played numerous times, amplifying anger and channelling it into collective strength: *Hum inquilāb haī, hum inquilāb haī / Hum kisī kī jāgir nahī, inquilāb haī / Hum zulm kī tasvīr nahī, inquilāb haī* (Women Democratic Front 2020)¹⁰⁴. WAF playlist narrated instead of collective joy, hope and sisterhood rooted in past struggles: *Daryā kī Qasam, maujō kī Qasam, yeh tanā-banā badlīgā* (“by the oath of the river, by the oath of the waves, this social fabric will change!”) (ASR 2022)¹⁰⁵. Another song written in the 1980s by the Indian feminist Kamla Bhasin was played as part of WAF repertoire: *Tumhāra sāth milne se, ehśaas-e-kuvvat āyā hai / Nayī duniyā banāne kā, junūn phir ham pe chhāyā hai* (“Having you with me, I feel uplifted / The passion to build a new world has returned to us”). We passed offices of corporate and state buildings, where many men leaned from windows, while others came down into the streets, curious, smirking, all filming the rare event of women singing, dancing, and shouting in the streets happening once a year (Figure 22). At one moment, as the Punjabi hit *Pīchhe Haṭ* played, a man at the window started moving along with music as some marchers were filming him. The song had been released by the gilgiti singer Hasan Raheem, who few days later wrote on x that the song, starting with the line *Rāstā chorīye, ab ham ā gaī!* (“Clear the way, we have arrived!”) had become the anthem of the movement (Raheem, March 2023). As I moved in the middle of the march, where the

¹⁰⁴ We are revolution, we are revolution / We are not anyone’s property; we are revolution/ We are not images of oppression; we are revolution!” In the anthem, *jāgir* evokes both the feudal system of landholding in Pakistan and the notion of property, blending patriarchy with feudal and class oppression. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sJ7WgoLNIXU&list=RDsJ7WgoLNIXU&start_radio=1

¹⁰⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oC4Bd7FJKf8&t=115s>

music was less audible, some participants were shouting *Mūrat kyā mānge? Āzādī! Hai ḥaq hamārā: āzādī! Ham le ke rahēge: āzādī!* (“What do *mūrat* want? Freedom! It is our right: freedom! We will take it: freedom!”)¹⁰⁶. Other songs flowed through the march, such as Meesha Shafi's *Na Tuteya ve*. The singer in 2019 had sung at the *Aurat March* in Lahore in the context of an ongoing legal case, following her public allegation against a prominent Pakistani musician for sexual harassment (Qamar et al. 2021). Her accusations had played a pivotal role in catalyzing the #MeToo movement in Pakistan, which had garnered nationwide attention the previous year (Shaheed 2023).

As we approached the end point near Faletti Hotel, one of the oldest and prestigious residences in Lahore, the truck, soon serving as the stage, neared the final gathering area, while slogans carrying attention to intersectionality of struggles rang out: *Jab tak Balōch tang rahēge! Jung rahegī! Jung rahegī! Jab tak Pashtūn tang rahēge! Jung rahegī! Jung rahegī!* As the participants settled in front of the stage, in the shade of a big tree and surrounded by policemen, Youtubers, curious passerby, some volunteers started singing the *tappay*. These provided a ritual passage from the march to the *ja/la*, adding layers of irreverence and intimacy, bringing closer volunteers and the audience (Figure 23). The program unfolded with performances and musical pieces from diverse artists, while at the back the shouts and complaints of Youtubers were disrupting the joyous atmosphere, attempting to capture attention on the event, and some, enraged by the fact that many participants refused to release interviews. The music was paused when the *A'zān* (call for prayer), started echoing from nearby mosques, and we waited in silence for the gathering to resume. The song *Kūriye mēre des diye*, originally sung by the Delhi-based women's rights collective *Pinjrā Tōr* (Break the Cage) protesting discriminatory policies on female college campuses, was also played. While in the past marches it had been previously sung by various women artists, during my fieldwork in 2023 was chanted by the volunteers and in 2024 was performed by children from the Harbanspura school community, where *Aurat March* had been volunteering. The day concluded with volunteers dancing to *Hum Dekhenge*, the emotional intensity of the music filling the streets that were gradually getting empty, leaving in the atmosphere a lingering sense of collective joy, strength, and hope.

¹⁰⁶ In activist circles, ‘moorat’ (originally found in sufi spirituality) is today commonly used to refer to queer identities in Pakistan, including the Trans and *Khwāja-sīrā* community. It was employed in the first Moorat March of the country, held in November 2022 at Freire’s Hall in Karachi.



Fig. 22. Scenes from *Aurat March* as participants march on Egerton Road. The first and the third images depict men observing the march from nearby office buildings (March 8, 2022), while the central image

depicts an aerial view taken from the truck of the volunteers and the participants chanting slogans as they march (March 8, 2024). Source: Photos of the author.



Fig. 23: Scenes depicting the participants enjoying and dancing at the *Aurat March* 2023 (first image) and 2024 (second image). In particular, the images show WAF Lahore members dancing in circles on the recorded music near the stage. Source: Photos of the author.

In her seminal work “Feminisms. A Global History” (2020) **Lucy Delap** asks, “what is it like to hear feminism?”, prompting a shift in focus toward the aural dimensions of women's struggles. Rather than concentrating solely on the texts and speeches that have

historically framed feminist movements, she urges attention to chants, songs and musical performances as central forms of feminist political practices:

“We can literally or imaginatively hear feminisms, through their shouts, keening, music and song. Songs and music are not easy political or protest tools. They intensify sentiments and offer complex, elusive or double meanings. Their messages are often interpreted according to the listener’s needs. A song, therefore, is not simply a heart- warming icon of solidarity, but does different cultural and political work when performed in different contexts.” (2020, 332)

On the International Women’s Day, *Aurat March* unfolded a dynamic and rich soundscape echoing in the streets and filling them with a spectrum of emotions of anger, exuberance, pride, joy and hope. The songs and slogans did more than fill the streets with sound, but performed a “cultural and political work” (Ibid), intertwining in public space, interrupting everyday routines, and commanding attention. Their rhythms and words provoked reactions across multiple audiences: pedestrians paused to watch, office workers leaned out, social media creators criticised the songs, while marchers were joyously dancing on the same rhythms. Music and songs shaped the march as a contested site where emotions were amplified, politics contested, and feminist claims were made audible. Some of these songs, such as *Daryā kī Qasam* and *Tumhārā Sāth Milne Se* have constituted an enduring component of the WAF repertoire, maintained and performed over several decades. In the following pages, I focus on this musical repertoire to explore how songs that were once part of archival and limited WAF celebrations have been embedded in contemporary feminist practice. Beyond their public performance, they emerge as important nodes of emotional engagement, connecting women across generations. Drawing particularly on Soof’s experience attending the farewell party of ASR, a research center founded by one of WAF members, I examine how collective chanting acquires political significance in the present, highlighting how legacy-making operates as a performative and affective process within this space.

4.5.2 WAF Playlist: Networks of Friendship and Voices

The sudden burst of dancing by Women’s Action Forum (WAF) in 2019 introduced a previously unheard soundscape into the newly emerging *Aurat March*. Embedded within

it was what Wahdan, analyzing the Tahrir Square's uprisings, describes as a "repertoire of experiences" (2014, 64), embodied histories carried by women who had been shaping the history of resistance since Zia's military dictatorship.

These songs mobilize layered memories and historical trajectories as political resources, reactivating and rearticulating a transregional feminist resistance constituted through interconnected collectives across South Asia. The songs and chants, created during workshops and conferences held throughout the subcontinent and gathering feminists from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, articulated shared sensibilities, solidarities, and alliances among women who connected and supported one another across borders and conflicts, wars of Independence, such as the one carried out by Bangladesh, and wars for contented territories, such as between India and Pakistan. As **Amrita Chhachhi** and **Sunila Abeysekera (2015)** have noted, the 1980s marked a formative historical moment for encounters among South Asian feminists, initiating "a process of creating an effective South Asian feminist community", (556) which laid the groundwork for networks and organizations that emerged in the following decade. These transregional meetings and workshops, while theorizing shared histories and coordinating joint campaigns, also gave rise to lifelong friendships, intimate affective relationships, and forms of political kinship grounded in conscious coalition and affinity. Reflecting on these connections, Neelam Hussein, writer and founding member of Simorgh Publishing House and of WAF, told me:

*"You see this is again something which has been lost. The kind of antagonism that this India is promoting on that site... And the current setup here is promoting towards India as an enemy... But we were networking, these were networks that some were prior to the women's movements! You know, we had families this side and that side (...) Women were going abroad to Europe, to America to study... To England... And connections were being made there... Between Indian women, middle east women.. Internationally. And then when those women came back, came back to their own homes, their relationships continued. (...) And I think in that regional networking very deep friendships were... I mean, which are still there today. I mean, when I think of those I think of them as my indian family, as my bangladeshi family, and it was that kind of trust. That no matter what the countries are doing, no matter what horrible things happen... The fallout won't be on our relationship. Because there is an understanding that **we speak in a different voice, and it is a shared voice!**" (Neelam Hussein, March 1, 2024).*

As Indian feminist Bhasin and WAF member Nighat Said Khan wrote, alongside epistemological reflection, these spaces became fertile sites of cultural sharing and

creative production, where collective chanting, songs, poems and skits, unfolded through the sessions, were integral to feminist work and of their being together (Bhasin and Khan 1988). WAF member Samina Rahman reflected on how these South Asian bonds of political work and friendship enabled songs to function as a transnational repertoire through which feminist across South Asia could articulate solidarity and support for one another's struggles. Born in India into an Urdu-speaking migrant family and raised in Lahore, she co-founded Lahore Grammar School (LGS) together with other women, helping establish what would become one of the country's most prominent elite educational institutions. During the years of General Zia Ul Haq, she also mobilized against the regime's regressive policies through her association with WAF. She particularly recalled Kamla Bhasin's remarkable creativity, noting that she "could write a song off the top of her head!":

*"All of us became very good friends throughout these South Asian meetings. And as I say ASR in particular played a big role but so did other organizations. So... **Tor tor ke bandhon ko...** Kamla actually wrote when we broke the barriers. At that time, this was something that she wrote, in fact, keeping our movement in mind (...) which actually became our anthem! Tor tor ke... You know recently we had ASR¹⁰⁷, a gathering because ASR is closing! So that one we were singing, and there were many others! From the revolutionary movements... And Habib Jalib and all of that... This has been a form of expression." (Samina Rahman, February 26, 2024)*

The song **Tor tor ke bandhoñ ko** illustrates a legacy where political history is both produced and recounted through creative practices. The WAF protest in 1982 was a source of inspiration for Bhasin's creation of the song which, in turn, continues to inform women's imaginations, experiences, and emotional engagements with historical struggles, shaping how these moments are narrated and felt. Such songs also present a feminist legacy built through transregional solidarity and friendships among women activists across South Asia, a legacy that, as Neelam Hussein notes, has relatively been lost among younger generations. The song captured, through its rhythmic, catchy verses, the rupture (*tor tor ke bandhoñ ko*) that women had brought into the oppressive religious-political establishment:

*"Tor tor ke bandhoñ ko dekho bahānen ātī haiñ
 Āo dekho logoñ, dekho bahānen ātī haiñ*

¹⁰⁷ Applied Socio-Economic Research Resource Centre, founded by WAF member Nighat Said Khan

*Ā'eṅgī zulm miṭā'eṅgī voh to nayā zamānā lā'eṅgī*¹⁰⁸

Ṭor ṭor ke bandhoñ ko was the song with which WAF women spontaneously took the stage at Al-Hamra in the first march in 2019, a moment that remained deeply engraved in the memories of young volunteers as a promise of a future rooted in sisterhood and collective transformation. As archival footage of WAF performances shows, the song was performed on multiple occasions, including at the Pakistan National Women's Day *Jalsa* held in Lahore in February 1985 (WAF 2022)¹⁰⁹, as well as in several other events over the years. Bhasin also composed *Tumhara Saath Milne Se* (Sangat 2018)¹¹⁰, adapting the lyrics of the Bollywood song *Hai Apna Dil Toh Awara*. This song was adopted as the soundtrack of a video produced by *Aurat March* volunteers in 2019, accompanying footage of the first long, colorful procession that took to the streets, and circulated on social media.¹¹¹ (*Aurat March* Lahore 2019).

Across the 1990s, upper-middle-class cultural spaces, such as Al-Hamra Arts Council, the Punjab Institute of Language, Art & Culture (PILAC) or the National College of Art, became important sites devoted for the articulation of cultural politics, where artistic and creative production/process were incorporated and reclaimed as a central part of feminist theorization. Although WAF and other institutions, such as the ASR (Applied Socio-Economic Research Resource Centre) established by Nighat Said Khan in 1982-83, had long documented their performances, these materials remained largely inaccessible for many years, preserved only on cassettes and videotapes. Their digitalization and online dissemination, through websites and YouTube uploads, has occurred only recently. Despite this, during my fieldwork in Lahore, the original audio and video recordings were still unavailable for consultation, as they remained stored in the LUMS archives. It should be noted that during the years in which WAF conducted its political, cultural, and performative activism, Pakistan National Television (PTV), the only channel available in the Country, was subject to intense state censorship and

¹⁰⁸ "Look at the sisters breaking their chains, they are coming!
Come, see the people, see the sisters are coming!
They will end oppression and bring a new era."

¹⁰⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hTRWAW4uxUY>

¹¹⁰ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MWR5kLr9Qko&list=RDMWR5kLr9Qko&start_radio=1

¹¹¹ <https://www.facebook.com/reel/2302505240033153>

control, which only began to ease with the liberalization of television channels in the late 1990s. As Munira Cheema (2018) observed, state broadcasting became a key instrument through which definitions of “*obscenity*” were articulated, leading to the exclusion and stigmatization of musical and bodily performances deemed transgressive. According to Farida Shaheed (2023), the audiocassettes of songs and poems recorded during this period represented a powerful form of agentive and subversive counter-practice against Zia’s cultural hegemonic project, one in which women, perceived as sources of potential *fitna* (chaos), were positioned as primary targets. This rich cultural production, referred to by volunteers as the “WAF playlist”, has become a central component of the annual *Aurat March*. The feminist soundscape, once preserved in physical and later digital archives, has transformed into a living repertoire (Taylor, 2003), continuously reactivated within the contemporary struggle and infused with melodies, rhythms, and affective registers of transregional dissent and desires.

4.5.3 “*Ham dēkh rahē haiñ*”¹¹²: Collective Chants as Living Legacy

In the previous chapter, I argued to understand legacy not as a static narrative that is passively received, but as a processual formation unfolding within affective and embodied practices which rework past political memories. For Soof, who had only recently joined *Aurat March* as a volunteer, the closing ceremony of ASR in December 2023 represented a pivotal affective moment through which she came to situate her own feminist struggle within a broader genealogy of collective resistance. ASR was established by WAF member Nighat Said Khan in 1983 as a feminist and socialist organization engaged in promoting social development, research, and capacity-building. Over the years, it became one of the largest women’s research and advocacy centers in Pakistan, organizing national and international conferences and introducing many generations to feminist history (ASR 2023). Few days before 2020 *Aurat March*, ASR had also organized an exhibition titled “In the present lies the past: feminist excavations”¹¹³, presenting a visual and written account (with photos, prints,

¹¹² We are witnessing (Soof, Interview, July 1, 2024)

¹¹³ “In the present lies the past: feminist excavations”

<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.813050219170441&type=3>

publications) of some of the most salient moments of the history of women's resistance in the region from the colonial period, set up as part of Lahore Biennale. Soof, who was 25 years old at the time of my research, was one of the volunteers I grew closest to, with whom I spent time together in cafés, *bazārs* and bookshops, other than meetings and marches. On one warm afternoon, we cherished a slow walk at Model Town Park, one of Lahore's favorite leisure spots in an upper-middle-class residential area, and one of the few places in the city where a sense of calm pervades. Soof mentioned that she really enjoyed parks, where she would often capture details with her phone and post them on her social media. It was on her Instagram profile that I first encountered an image that drew my attention: a storyline of photos showing WAF and *Aurat March* participants reunited, immersed in collective chanting and rejoicing together. When I asked her about that gathering, some months after the meeting, Soof enthusiastically described to me the ASR farewell gathering as a "turning point" for the way "everybody met each other". In that moment, she mentioned, "three generations of feminists" came visible to her, conversations were "initiated", and women enthusiastically felt the need to learn about each other's lived experiences (Soof, July 1, 2024). The gathering brought together women who, over the past decades, had played active roles in shaping social and political change and advancing feminist struggles, including members of WAF and the *Aurat March*.

Before beginning her volunteer work with the *Aurat March*, Soof was unaware of the existence of such history. She had grown up in a highly controlling household, where even the most private areas of her home were subject to surveillance. During our online interview, she often paused to check the door, responding to sounds she had learned to notice over time. Her parents were not supportive, particularly regarding education, and she received little encouragement to pursue hobbies or extracurricular activities, and her mobility was also restricted. In an effort to gain independence, Soof began working and volunteering in multiple contexts, creating personal space away from parental control. This caution extended in particular during the *Aurat March*, when she would change her clothing entirely and cover her phone to avoid recognition. While at home she displayed no reference to feminist politics, her Instagram served as a private platform for self-expression. The ASR gathering provided a space where she could

experience feelings of inclusion, self-expression and agency: it was here where she first encountered the existence of multiple generations of feminists, experiencing a profound sense of rootedness and belonging that was entirely new to her.

"This was a beautiful day! I was, again.. This is my first time doing anything, I was obviously very hesitant of being part of that space. I was like, I have a lot of concerns waise, when I walk into spaces, if I can do this, if I can do that. But yeah I didn't have a plan to attend this and I was thinking about it and then I saw the invitation that they made... The moment I walked in I felt this is an alternate reality! You know, I didn't feel anything that would align with my real world (...) In the past life I don't think I would have ever ever thought that I could ever sit with these people and, you know, share that space. Sometimes I feel like what if all of this is in vain, you know, we are not doing something worth fighting. This is the scene that they are existing! It was like the proof that people have been doing this for so long! And people will... Us, we will continue to do this for a very long time, as long as we can!" (Soof, July 1, 2024)

Soof's words highlight the stark contrast between the restrictive spaces she was accustomed to in her everyday life ("the real world") and the liberating atmosphere of the ASR gathering, which she described as an "alternate reality". Through these encounters, the resistance of earlier activists, as embodied by WAF women, provides both a framework for imagining the present struggle and a source of motivation for future action, shaping the ways feminist legacy is felt, internalized, and sustained. Unlike other volunteers like Zaineb, Hadiqa, and Zoya, who had prior exposure to WAF through professional, academic and institutional circles, Soof had not encountered such spaces earlier, largely due to differences in family background and access to social and cultural capital. During the interview, Soof recalled one instance in which she recognized a core WAF member, Salima Hashmi, a celebrated artist, professor, and daughter of the renown poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz. As a child, Soof had won a competition and had received an award for it from Hashmi, who had been invited as a chief guest at the school's ceremony. Yet, until that gathering, she was not aware that "she existed in these spaces (WAF) at all":

"I remember I was just sitting there and I was just seeing her, she has grown old and every time I was... I just remembered that moment that day, that moment, that little kid... Could never have imagined that she would have been sitting here so many years later sharing the space with Salima Hashmi. Like sitting in the same space as her, that was very... Moments like these make me realize ok Soof you have come very far, you have done something in your life to be able to experience this, you have done something! Because mostly I am very self critical of myself but you

know moments like this are what makes it worth it and I was very quiet that day, I was just looking at her..." (ibid.)

During the ASR farewell ceremony, Salima Hashmi and other WAF members led collective singing, followed by the volunteers. The repertoire included WAF classics, shaped by South Asian feminist exchanges, such as *Daryā kī Qasam*, *Toṛ Toṛ ke*, and *Hamārā Sāth Milne se* alongside recent contributions by younger volunteers, like Tuba's *Kudiye mere Des Diye*. This spontaneous singing and clapping transformed the event into a site where the cultural memory of women's resistance was enacted as an intergenerational collective imaginary, infusing the space with joy and emotional resonance. Particularly, when Faiz's ghazal *Hum Dekhenge* was chanted in jubilation, Soof captured that performance with her camera, which later posted on Instagram, accompanied by the caption *Hum dēkh rahē hai* ("We **are** witnessing"):

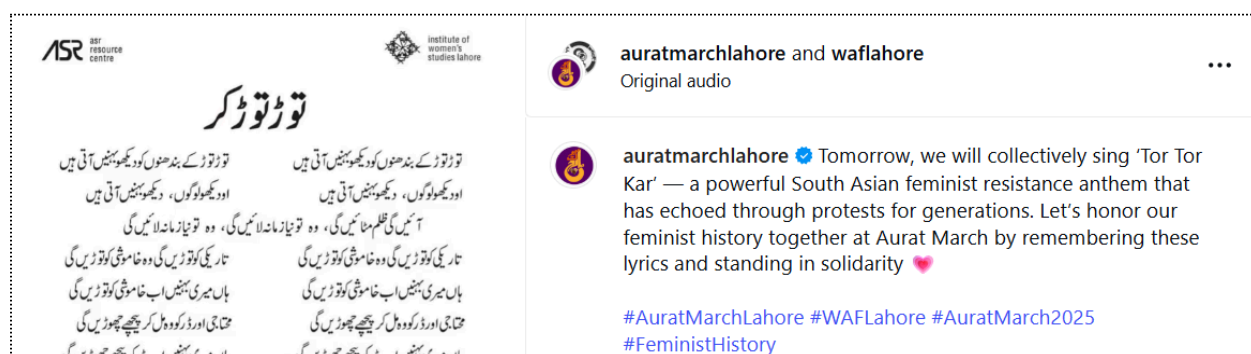
"I felt that hum dekhenge was a way to signify the prior struggle that we have... The people of that time have not gone through but we have gone through right? Like hum dekhenge tou woh purānī bāt hai! Now we are... Hum dēkh rahē hai, you know, we are seeing that in real time. So we have made that ... progress. We have made that effort! So it is not just... the thing is not that ki hum dēkhēngē. Hum dēkh rahē hai! In the present time, we are making those changes we are making. We are trying and we are resisting!" (ibid.)

The parallel she draws between "hum dekhenge" and "hum dekh rahe hai" reflects her journey, marking a shift from inherited hope to present action. By situating herself within a lineage of feminist struggle, she narrates that the aspirations and achievements of past generations are now witnessed, and the fights once envisioned are not embodied in her generation. This, I suggest, underscores how legacy is grounded in present imaginaries and interpretations of the past, shaped through intersecting emotions and perspectives that draw on history to make sense of the present. In our discussion, Soof recounted another meaningful moment where her personal struggle to carve out a space for expression became acknowledged.

"At one point they sang the first stanza and they forgot, and I was the only person who sang the next stanza and I felt 'oh nobody is participating!' And everybody was looking at me and I was... 'I know this I know by heart!' And even Salima Hashmi was looking at me. It was a very... kyā kahtē hāīn [What do they say]... One of those moments very special. I actually have that document and then Hadiqa was like 'Oh accha [well] you are right!' And then everybody started singing them and

we sang other songs as well. (...) Then when I went home and I sent this picture and Zoya later told me that the oldies were basically saying that I was the one taking all of these pictures. And she was like 'the oldies are saying that this girl really knows her way around the camera!' And it was such a beautiful compliment!! I was like. The rare and most natural form for me. Like this is very special! (Ibid.)

Soof's encounter with WAF constituted a significant moment in which her personal struggle for recognition and self-expression was both situated within a broader feminist legacy and simultaneously recognized. In this space, her knowledge, skills, and passions, frequently marginalized or overlooked in familial, educational, and social contexts, were acknowledged and valued. After the conclusion of my fieldwork, these songs were performed again during the *Aurat March* 2025, whose theme was "**Feminist Histories**". That year, due to the impossibility of organizing the march on its usual date, coinciding with the period of *Ramzān*, volunteers decided to hold it on February 12, which marks the historical Women's Day in Pakistan¹¹⁴. This resonance prompted the volunteers to choose "Feminist Histories" as the theme for the march. On this occasion, the march was co-organized by WAF for the first time in seven years. The lyrics of the songs *tor tor kē* and *zarā sab sē kah dō* were shared on Instagram with the logos of both *Aurat march* and WAF, as well as ASR (Figure 24). In this sense, the convergence of these women reconfigured the framing of their musical repertoire, positioning it as a shared and collectively constituted. As the caption described, the song was now interpreted as an embodied expression of a wider "south asian feminist resistance" which could be honoured and remembered through the act of collective singing itself.



¹¹⁴ The date indicates the day when WAF Lahore led a historical uprising against Zia's regime, which resulted in the unjust arrest of activists.

Fig. 24: Detail of the *Aurat March* post published on their Instagram account to share the WAF song that would be sung on the march in 2025. Source: *Aurat March* Instagram Account

4.6 Reimagining Feminist Genealogies

“The truth that resilience may be just as much as feminist quality as rebellion is lost in the story of feminism that is written and populated entirely by white women. This too is a legacy of white supremacy: feminism itself has never been disaggregated from the white gaze.” (Zakariya, 2021, 13-14).

In light of the discussions developed in this chapter, I return to the question that has underpinned it and ask how might feminist genealogies be reframed and reimagined? How might they be reconceptualized, moving beyond linear frameworks toward more processual, affective, and spatial understandings of legacy? The tendency within white academia to historicize feminist movements through the metaphor of “waves,” originating in the Global North, has been reproduced across diverse contexts and, for decades, has served as a dominant interpretive framework. However, although the “wave” framework has been still widely applied, in relation to South Asian feminist history too, scholars have also pointed out its epistemological implications and questioned its analytical usefulness. This approach is both problematic and limiting, for it often overlooks the regional complexities of feminist expressions, sensibilities, entanglements and understandings, thereby hindering the exploration of more contextually appropriate concepts. Historicization is itself embedded in power hierarchies and relations that shape how feminist histories are constructed, determining what is centered, what is silenced, and whose experiences are archived or erased. The writing of feminist genealogies thus demands reflection on the positionalities from which such histories are produced and the hierarchies they reproduce. Building on the critiques developed in feminist theory and drawing on *Aurat March*’s volunteers’ perspectives, this chapter reflects on the limitations of the metaphor within the context of my case study and proposes alternative ways of conceptualizing feminist genealogies.

4.6.1 Beyond Waves

In Pakistani scholarship and among feminist activists, the metaphor of “waves” has remained for long widely used also in relation to *Aurat March*, whether referring to a “new”, “third” or “fourth” wave (Saigol and Chaudhary 2020; Batool 2020; Batool and Malik 2021; Dossa 2021). Despite its prevalence, feminist critiques have interrogated the limitations of this framework. Linda Nicholson, for instance, highlights that the “wave” metaphor, by constructing feminism as a singular, linear phenomenon that rises and recedes, privileges highly visible, large-scale mobilizations while obscuring less visible forms of feminist practice that emerge between these “so-called waves” (Nicholson 2010).

In Pakistan, the struggles of transitional cohorts (such as the “in-between generation” between WAF activists and *Aurat March* women) have remained largely unrecognized. This neglect encompasses both individual women whose work was carried out quietly, and the efforts of women’s collectives and organizations, whose contributions, though less visible than large-scale street mobilizations, were nonetheless significant and transformative. The political mobilization of upper-middle-class women in the 1980s, as earlier discussed, evolved in subsequent decades through *jalsas* and cross-border collaborations, marking a period of intense theoretical activity and political creativity, resulting in enduring networks sustained by long-lasting friendships. Furthermore, the spaces that several WAF women established across Pakistan during this period, including NGOs, resource centers, research organizations and colleges, played crucial role in transmitting feminist values, knowledge, and practices to future generations, thereby sustaining a social, educational and cultural environment in which many *Aurat March* volunteers grew up.

In her recent essay (2023), Lahore-based activist **Shmyla Khan** critiques waves as a flawed conceptual framework arguing that it erases the histories and trajectories of non-Western and non-white feminist movements and overlooks the works of indigenous scholarships. As she emphasized, the rich indigenous history of Pakistani women’s resistance, spanning class and ethnicity, from the *Sindhiyani Tēhrīk* to the *Okāra* military

farms movement, from the post-Partition All-Pakistan Women's Association to contemporary struggles led by Baloch women, are rendered invisible within dominant Orientalist and imperial discourses. These narratives continue to otherize so-called "third world women," (Mohanty et al 1991) particularly after 9/11, framing them as passive victims devoid of agency. Over the years, *Aurat March* has deeply engaged with questions of representation, agency, and solidarity, actively aligning itself with political movements that recently have challenged state and army oppression in Pakistan, such as the women uprisings led by the *Baloch Yakjehti Committee* and women heading from Pashtun movements. Through these alliances, the movement has sought to expand the understanding of feminist struggle as indigenous not only temporally but a genealogy that expands horizontally, is interconnected and attentive to the diverse experiences of women across class, ethnicity, and geography, both in the past and in the present. This effort to build feminist genealogies beyond the linear framework of "waves" and to foreground the intersectionality, indigeneity and multiplicity of local feminist trajectories was made explicit and historicized in the 2025 *Aurat March*, whose theme was "Feminist History." In presenting the theme, the collective framed its understanding of feminist history as follows:

"Feminism has always been part of the subcontinent's history - from the Women's Action Forum resisting dictatorship to the Okara Peasant movement reclaiming land, from Fatima Sughra raising Pakistan's flag in defiance and the khwāja-sīrā's community resisting colonial erasure. Lahore's history is celebrated, but often without acknowledging the women and khwāja-sīrā who shaped it. This year, we remember their voices and legacies. Feminist history is a continuum - not isolated movements. Present struggles draw strength for the past, and past movements find hope in the present- Honoring this history friends us that activism is long, generational work. One day, Aurat march's present will inspire a bolder, more liberated future." (@Aurat march Lahore, 27/12/24)

Aurat March reaffirmed the *indigeneity* of feminism within the region by situating both past and present struggles within a shared framework of resistance, foregrounding histories that have been marginalized in dominant narratives in Pakistan. These exclusions, the collective argued, stem not only from the tendency to overlook forms of resistance that fall outside the paradigm of "large-scale movements" (a limitation inherent in the "waves" framework), but also from an elitist historiography that has neglected the uprisings led by oppressed and subaltern communities, reflecting the

classed and center-periphery biases that have shaped the production of feminist knowledge. The voices of *khwāja-sīrā* communities, uprisings such as the *Okāra* Peasant Movement in Punjab (Saigol 2010; Mumtaz and Mumtaz 2012), women's movements such as the *Sindhiani Tēhrīk* in Sindh, or more recent mobilizations of the *Baloch Yakjehti Committee* (BYC) in Balochistan and the *Waak Tehrīk* of Pashtun women have been researched comparatively less, or have been silenced within the feminist archive. Rather than dispersing these struggles across waves, the collective imagines a continuum of entangled formations, inspiring each other and united by a shared history of resistance to patriarchy, capitalism and neocolonial violence, where the relationship with the women “who came before us” is understood as an ongoing, reciprocal form of *generational work* and one that involves both “drawing strength” from the past and “finding hope” in the present. Aalya Ahmad (2015) argues that feminist movements critical of the wave metaphor, understood as anchored in white feminist historiography, advocate for the reclamation of alternative genealogies grounded in figures and communities whose struggles draw upon centuries of indigenous resistance to patriarchy, colonial gendered violence and capitalist dispossession. As discussed earlier in the chapter, this reclamation was central in Heer and Sangat's work, who brought into the space of *Aurat March* a reading of feminism as an indigenous expression embedded in Punjabi literature, one that has long destabilized gender norms and articulated a sustained critique of patriarchy way before white feminism. Kamal (2024) argued the importance of rejecting the metaphor of generational waves on the grounds that it constructs feminist history as marked by inherent opposition between successive waves. She instead proposed thinking in terms of distinct spatialities, which she characterizes as **“spaces of difference” and spaces “of transmissions and transitions”** (85), within which the exploration and formation of diverse identities occur. From this perspective, such spaces present layered histories and experiences that traverse generations, where identities are articulated through engagements with collective and cultural memory. As discussed throughout this chapter, spaces such as the *Aurat March*, ASR farewell ceremony, *jalsas* and other feminist encounters operate in this manner, where processes of mutual recognition, validation, and reciprocity

constitute foundational mechanisms of legacy-making, emerging through both continuities and dissonances.

In both the literature and conversations with the volunteers, the metaphor of motherhood emerged. For many volunteers **motherhood** represented a contested terrain, reflecting divergent opinions of their life decisions, being supportive of their journey, being ambivalent or contrary to their engagement with *Aurat March*. At the same time, as Khan contends, “feminism for millennials was a rebuttal to acknowledge what our mothers had been going through with their silence” (2024,144) highlighting how *Aurat March*’s performative politics prompted reflection on the less visible yet equally resilient struggles of their mothers. For Emil, introduced in the first chapter, sharing one of the artworks she had made for *Aurat March* became a means of opening up to her mother, who had not permitted her to attend the march, and engaging her in a conversation about feminism, her values and beliefs (Emil, November 10, 2022). Similarly, Laiba described how presenting her poster for the *Aurat March* fostered a moment of profound affective connection with her grandmother and mother, who, in particular, get emotional and shared how deeply her art had moved her and allowed her to envision an alternate Lahore she imagined to experience (Laiba, February 23, 2023). The metaphor of mothers/foremothers, explored in Kamal’s work (2024), as encompassing affective and healing dimensions, has been reclaimed and reframed as a form of chosen feminist kinship. Soof, reflecting on her encounter with senior WAF women, recounted:

“We talked, where she has been, what she has done in the past... And whenever I meet someone like that, the first moment I click I was oh I wish she was my mother! Oh I wish she was... I wanted to imagine what growing up with something like that would have been like, you know, It just gave me so much!” (Soof, July 1, 2024)

For Soof, motherhood entailed the care, trust and love which she could find in political spaces, which, unlike her family environment, provided her a nurturing experience of growth within feminist activism. For Zoya too this metaphor reflects the affective bonds established with senior women activists (“there was a lot of love”), which developed in the years after 2019, when WAFers were often depicted as their “grannies” (Zoya,

March 19, 2024). As she recounted, the “in-between generation” (of her mother) often did not constitute a reference point for women like her, who belong to a generation that primarily learned about feminism through the internet and social media. This affective dimension, often obscured in wave-based historiographies, underscores how desires, longings, and yearnings are central in shaping how feminist genealogies are imagined, felt, and narrated.

4.6.2 A Feminist Tapestry

In her work “Against White Feminism” (2021), **Rafia Zakaria** argues:

“To make their experience explicit, feminists of all kinds must work to develop their one genealogies, to look at the women in their lives and in their own histories who have not been considered “feminist” because they do not mirror the projects and priorities of white women.” (Zakaria, 2021, 14).

Scholars have increasingly employed more nuanced metaphors to capture the continuities, divergences, disconnections, and non-linear natures of feminist histories. In recent years, feminist genealogies have been conceptualized as ecosystems, highlighting the entanglement that sustain diverse practices, imaginaries, collective movements and individual trajectories. Building on this approach, Holland (2015) has drawn on Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the rhizome to frame feminist history as decentralized, multidirectional, non-hierarchical, and interconnected. Alternatively, Lucy Delap (2020), in her work on global feminism, has employed the metaphor of a mosaic to emphasize how feminisms are assembled from inherited “fragments” (intended as movements, individuals, actions, and ideas) that produce distinctive patterns and pictures. According to her, this metaphor not only helps capture the singularity of each feminist history but also acknowledges the gaps and exclusions, the “missing pieces” representing silenced voices and marginalized actors.

Kamal (2024) employs the metaphor of an **interwoven tapestry** to capture the complexity and entanglement of these feminist genealogies in Pakistan, a metaphor also earlier used by Fouzia Saeed (2022), in the her research framing women's

socio-political activism in Pakistan from Partition till the present. This metaphor resonates with Shumail's work (2020), discussed in this chapter, which examined the encounter between WAF and the younger urban collectives in Lahore before their relationship would be reworked through *Aurat March*. Shumail's title, ***Tānā Bānā*** ("Social fabric"), refers to *Daryā kī Qasam*, a song that has become an enduring part of the annual march's soundscape and had been chanted for decades by WAF women today joined by young activists. The song was written by the Aurat Foundation (Islamabad women's rights organization established in 1986) and its lyrics is an invitation for women to change the society by speaking out against oppressive hierarchies rooted in cultural and social patriarchy. This concept (the interconnectedness of society) derives from its literal meaning, which is "the warp and weft" (Rekhta n.d.)¹¹⁵: the two threads in weaving (warp, the vertical threads on a loom, and weft, the horizontal threads woven through the warp) that interlace to create the structure and texture of fabric.

Building on this image, I suggest a feminist tapestry woven from diverse threads (committed individuals, ideas, movements, and collectives) varied in material, age, color, and texture, which intertwine to form larger patterns of interconnected threads and gaps, creating a rich and living fabric. Like threads interwoven atop one another to form an intricate web in which each supports the others (some more visible than others) women's collectives and labour appear differently entangled across various phases, with certain ones becoming more prominent, while the less visible continue to uphold the larger framework. At times, the tapestry's weave is composed of tighter, more intricately interlaced strands, creating a denser texture; at other times, the weave loosens, becoming more open and spacious. The connections between generations or movements may at times stretch and loosen, and at others draw close in moments of renewed proximity. Just as a weave can be undone and rewoven, these relationships can be re-formed and strengthened as different women engage with one another, exchange knowledge, and expand their collective work through shared practices, encounters, and conversations. This genealogy is not fixed; its contours shift with

¹¹⁵ <https://www.rekhtadictionary.com/meaning-of-taanaa-baanaa>

memory, its textures shaped by embodied practices and its expressions refracted through cultural production. I argue that a similar process unfolded after the 2019 march, when collectives grounded in radically different feminist praxes, understandings, and collective memories came together to articulate a shared vision and collaborative agenda, simultaneously retracing and reimagining the very notion of legacy. What makes tapestry resistant or what tears it? At times, connections between women or collectives, like woven threads, may weaken or even rupture. In such instances, the tapestry frays, leaving gaps that endure until processes of closure and renewal generate new cohesion, reweaving the fabric with fresh meanings. As argued in this chapter, collective singing and performances have functioned as crucial sites for the production of cultural memory and the articulation of identities, the facilitation of intergenerational learning, and the reinforcement of affective bonds, thus actively participating in the shaping and remaking of feminist legacies and imaginaries.

Finally, I argue that weaving as a metaphor becomes particularly significant when examining how women have been performing this practice in the local context of the region, which reflects on the affective and inner dimension that sustains generational bonds I discussed in this chapter. Historically, weaving played a central role in Punjabi society. For example, the *Trinjan*, discussed in the first chapter, was a tradition in which women gathered to spin, sing, and weave collectively. In this context, weaving functioned as a space for community-building and the formation of gendered social bonds, where physical labor intertwined with self-expression, creativity, healing, and the transmission of cultural heritage. Weaving refers also to women's struggle as often carried out silently, within intimate relationships, reclaiming art and creativity as non-productive, necessary practices for feminist imaginaries and to generating or strengthening affective bonds. The history of feminist struggle is not only enacted in streets or public activism, but also in quiet acts of weaving, embroidering, and nurturing love and care across communities and generations. Genealogies are woven by marching together, imagining a past, discussing new futures, as well as through collective performances, poetries, chants and dances.

4.7 Conclusion

The chapter has sought to explore how the legacy of women's resistance has been imagined, represented and performed through the experiences of *Aurat March* volunteers, particularly in relation to earlier struggles led by WAF Lahore, whose members shared a similar urban upper-class background. Drawing from Diana Taylor, I have argued that embodied performances enacted at the march, mainly poetry recitations, dances, theatre performances, recorded songs, and collective chants, function as repertoires, as critical sites in which cultural memories, histories and identities of resistance are reproduced, reworked and made politically meaningful. These performances, embodying the practices of WAF women, their allies and political collectives such as *Sangat*, reproduce in contemporary feminist political histories of collective struggles against patriarchy and capitalist oppression, while claiming them as an expression and trace of the indigenously of feminist resistance in Lahore and in the region.

The chapter has also highlighted how the staging of performances does more than recalling a history of past struggle, like the one articulated against Zia's dictatorship. As both for WAF and *Sangat*, practices such as dance themselves constituted acts that volunteers identify with inherent defiance and dissent, underscoring the significance of performances as a powerful medium of indigenous resistance. By enacting historical struggles and embodying longstanding forms of resistance, encompassing WAF women's dances, poetry recitations by feminist poet Nasreen Bhatti or heading from the Pakistani left, volunteers reclaim together different struggles, situating present mobilizations within a longer political trajectory. Simultaneously, the *Aurat March* catalyzed a new activist and scholarly engagement, creating dialogical spaces in which two generationally-defined actors, the "old guard" and the emergent feminist millennial collectives, could jointly interrogate the trajectories, epistemic shifts and interconnections of the current women's movement. The *Aurat March* reshaped how senior scholars interpreted the movement and how young women situated themselves within its broader, often previously unknown, historical context of women uprisings in Pakistan. Within these performative spaces, memory is enacted not only through

intellectual discussions, equally present and incisive, but through oral, bodily and affective engagements, demonstrating that legacy is relationally produced through generational encounters in public and intimate spaces. Within these spaces, in fact, as argued in the chapter, cultural memory is not only enacted by the transmission of knowledge, practices of mutual learning and exchange of support across generations, but through deeply emotional and affective exchanges and resonance, bringing together generations of women who, before *Aurat March*, had perceived their praxis as unrelated, and where past histories were often widely unknown and kept within WAF's archive and more private celebrations. Legacy-making can be understood through Hajek's notion of societal inheritance, in which cultural memory and identity are not fixed repositories of prior knowledge to be simply transmitted, but are continually co-constituted through practices that reinterpret, rework, and enact the past within relational spaces of mutual learning and reciprocal recognition. This process is sustained not only through theoretical debates but also through emotional and affective dimensions that shape collective imaginaries and sensibilities across transgenerational and transregional struggles, friendships, and solidarities. Feminist genealogy, in this context, emerges as a complex, non linear tapestry that challenges the wave-based historiographical model. It is produced through embodied encounters and performances, reflective practices, intuitive insights, emotional connection, moments of ruptures, and desires that span generations, allowing feminist resistance to be continually reimagined, sustained, and enacted over time.

5. Looking Forward: Emerging feminist communities

“If the purpose of a movement is not only to agitate but also to create spaces of healing and transformation, then how do we measure such a process of unfolding? How do we quantify the experience of being confronted by art that bears stories of violence that survivors have never disclosed before? How do we capture the unquantifiable joy we experience when we irreverently chant feminist tappay together? These moments of courage, joy, and solidarity may not fit neatly into traditional metrics, yet they are powerful seeds of change. They foster emotional and cultural shifts that ripple through our communities, nourishing the soil from which larger systemic transformations can grow.” (Aurat March Lahore 2025)¹¹⁶

The present work sought to offer a different perspective on *Aurat March Lahore* by centering the lived experiences of volunteers as they navigate patriarchy and articulate collective feminist resistance. Moving beyond the contentious slogans and most spectacularized placards, this research highlighted how feminist politics is cultivated and sustained through creative, artistic and affective practices within the community of women volunteers. These dimensions are often overshadowed by media attention on the public controversy surrounding the march or by scholarly works directing attention to defining the movement, evaluating its success, or questioning its politics in relation to secular and religious grounds. Yet the *Aurat March* exists as much in the creative practices, imaginations and desires, emotional drives, and affects of its participants as it does in the visible enactment of protest. Behind the *March* lies a dense tapestry of relationships, efforts, and emotional investments that make collective action possible. By foregrounding volunteers' everyday experiences, this thesis has examined how they navigate and reimagine the city beyond spatial restrictions, articulate desires, hopes and imagine futures through songs, reconnect to local women's cultural repertoires by re-writing rhymes, forge feminist alliances within collective chants and re-enact past resistances in performances, weaving together personal and collective struggles. In

¹¹⁶ <https://narivaad.com/the-measure-of-a-movement/>

these intimate practices and spaces, feminist politics emerges through relationships, emotional exchanges, and acts of creativity.

A core argument of this research is that artistic and cultural practices are central, rather than peripheral, to activist work, serving as critical sites for the production of emotional, relational and intimate forms of knowledge rooted in both individual and collective experiences. Through performances, songs, visual artworks, poetry, dances, and other cultural modes of expressions such as the Punjabi *tappay*, volunteers engage in processes of political meaning-making where feminist agency emerges in acts of re-ownership, assertion, re-segnification. Engagement with artistic and cultural practice reveals the more subtle, deeply intimate and emotional dimension of agency, where art becomes a central medium through which feminist communities generate alternative epistemologies, articulate resistance and carry forward their political engagement.

Centering the *Aurat March* as a **community** also points to broader considerations for the study of feminist movements. In contexts marked by strong gender control and surveillance by multiple parties over women's lives and mobilities, the spaces created within activist communities become particularly significant beyond the political aims that the group formulate and issues that it addresses. These communities allow new openings and small cracks where women find unprecedented spaces to openly share experiences, express traumas and vulnerabilities, transform pain into collective rage, and find unconditional support often lacking in family or absent in society. Paying attention to such contexts highlights how care and solidarity are central elements of feminist labour and engagements, what sustains them, instills with courage and resilience. While these forms of solidarity are quieter, they constitute the relational and emotional infrastructure that makes collective action possible. For the broader study of feminist articulations, attending to these interpersonal dimensions reveals how activism is sustained in networks of care and trust. Further research could explore how these cultures of solidarity shape political participation, sustains activist engagement and influence the forms of feminist politics helping to fight back the backlash and the societal violence.

My research captured a particular moment of the **evolving trajectory** of the *Aurat March* as a community of volunteers who in the years preceding my first visit in 2022 had been facing intense backlash, including personal threats and attempts to legally ban the event. Besides the first *March* I attended, which did not reach its conclusion due to the sudden interruption by an angry mob of men, during the three years of my fieldwork marchers were exposed to less public attacks, apart from the yearly attempt of the city administration to deny them the permission to march. During my fieldwork there were transformations and shifts in their political work: joy, expressed in performances and songs, became an increasingly and conscious central practice for asserting their public presence and right to march, as well as sustaining their activism in the face of backlash and social repression. Irriverence, thought *tappay* and memes, opened a cathartic space and constituted a strategy to challenge moral hierarchies and the politics of respectability, targeting specific people with mockery and irreverence. Learning and singing collective chants produced within older feminist struggles became a way to re-enact past memories of resistance and situate their work within an ongoing legacy. At the same time, volunteers increasingly positioned their politics within the wider political landscape, engaging with forms of political organizing and positioning their work in relation with the country's shifting political crisis, climate concerns, economic instability and state violence, expanding their initial focus on bodily politics and gendered violence. This shift has been accompanied by attempts to build new solidarities and collaborative networks across ethnic and class boundaries with groups historically and contemporarily involved in other regional struggles and histories of resistance. These transformations have also been reflected in the *March's* creative expressions, such as slogans, chants, songs, art installations: while earlier works centered on body autonomy, sexuality and accountability (the first years prominence of the slogan *Mera Jism Meri Marzi*, the adaptation of chilean feminist collective Las Tesis's performance "El violador eres tu", or art pieces such as the "Me Too" blanket), more recent art interventions foregrounded solidarity with marginalized communities. For instance, the last march I attended displayed art installations dedicated to Pashthun refugees and the Baloch disappearances, as well as carried broader expressions of

international solidarity such as the kite installation for Palestinian children killed during the Gaza genocide carried out by Israel¹¹⁷. Whether some of these issues had been addressed earlier, in the last years these were presented in the public space through art and creative work. Chants and songs also reflect the coming together of different generations of activists, including those associated with earlier feminist movements such as WAF. In this context of emerging alliances, further research could examine how these diverse groups, by coming together, negotiate questions of politics, representation, and collaboration, and which obstacles come in these constructions of shared feminist trajectories, comprising different privileges, powers and positionalities. Art in this could be explored for the role it may play in mediating solidarity, difference, and also in addressing and reworking creative topics that are more sensitive, involving state and military violence and power across heterogeneous communities.

Connected to this, volunteers' mental health also emerges as a key arena for inquiry, which centers and foreground and takes seriously the different degrees of exhaustion and dangers that *Aurat March* volunteers, like many political movements in the country, faced. During my fieldwork, I observed that while many volunteers remained active over years, others stepped back temporarily or permanently, often due to mental and emotional fatigue. Organizing the *March* demands significant emotional labour and resilience, in coordinating and managing responsibilities, facing the harassment and misbehaviour happening by some men (media anchors particularly) on the day of the march or on their personal social media, as well as fighting back the public backlash, also having to appeal to legal means. In this sense, exploring the nexus between mental health and political work can constitute one important line of analysis, looking at the long-term consequences of sustained feminist activism, including burn out, as well as collective practices and strategies of coping and care.

¹¹⁷ Legal scholars, human rights organizations, UN experts and other institutions have been presenting reports discussing as genocide what Israel has done to Palestinian in Gaza. Among these, Amnesty International's report "You Feel Like You Are Subhuman": Israel's Genocide Against Palestinians in Gaza" (2024), UN Special Rapporteur Francesca Albanese's report "Gaza genocide: a collective crime" (2025) or B'Tselem's "Our Genocide" (2025). South Africa has formally accused Israel of violating the Genocide Convention in a case before the International Court of Justice, in December 2023 ("Application of the Convention on the prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide in the Gaza Strip").

As this study emphasized, regional and vernacular cultural practices from Punjabi literary and folk traditions have become increasingly present and relevant in shaping *Aurat March's* politics, its political imagination, in particular through performances.

Unfortunately, my limited knowledge of Punjabi constrained certain possibilities of inquiry that might otherwise be significant to pursue. Future research could investigate the implications, the impacts and transformation process related to the incorporation into feminist politics of these repertoires, and how these are re-read, re-interpreted and claimed within a modern feminist understanding while being enacted in the space of the march. Such engagements could provide insights into how upper middle class women navigate and negotiate linguistic and class identities, and explore what re-connecting to these repertoires, from which they grew up often unaware, entails and means. Examining the engagement with literary and folk tradition thus could illuminate the complex intersection between feminist praxis, local cultural repertoires, and processes of identity formation.

Finally, creative and artistic practices remain a central yet underexplored site for understanding the way feminist politics tackles oppressive forms of political rule. In a context of political surveillance and socio-cultural and moral policing, leading to several attempts to restrict or ban the march (ranging from accusations of blasphemy to being immoral and shameless), artistic expression becomes a site to bring dissent in the public sphere and articulate political ideas in a more subtle and disguised way. In this sense, further research could explore the interplay between censorship, art, and feminist praxis, considering also how self-censorship can become a strategy, both productive and protective, from which women draw particularly when addressing sensitive topics related to state, military or religious authority.

Taken together, these directions re-assert the necessity to situate feminist praxis within relational, community-based, and affective frameworks, recognizing both the intersecting personal and collective dimensions of activism. They encourage scholars to look beyond visible public demonstrations towards the subtle, emotional, and creative practices that sustain communities, foster solidarity, and enable feminist politics to endure and flourish within gruesome and challenging contexts.



Fig. 25. *Aurat March* volunteers' site inspection a few hours before the march. March 8, 2023. Source: Photo of the author.

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