

White Feminism in Relation to Pakistan's Aurat Marches

Suhana Kumar

Women have been fighting for their rights for centuries, and the concept of feminism has, in some shape or form, often always surrounded women and their fight to empower themselves and each other. When we think of “feminism,” and of advocating for women’s rights, sometimes we imagine the stereotypical feminist activist; short or dyed hair, maybe a few tattoos, holding up signs with slogans such as “the future is female!”. We may think of something much older, like the early 20th-century suffragettes who fought for voting rights in Europe and North America. We may even think of feminist icons such as Joan of Arc, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, or Simone de Beauvoir. In short, as individuals who are currently living and experiencing Western culture as we know it today, these are the women who shaped our perceptions of what it means to live in a free society as a woman. *But what about the rest of the world?*

North American feminists don’t always take into account the differences in struggle and disadvantages that women from marginalized countries have, as they themselves have not experienced those disadvantages that are often rooted in cultural context. It is not an easy thing to answer if women in other parts of the world have the same rights we have today, as their history, and their experiences, look very different. We can explore the lens of the variability of feminist activism through the example of the Aurat Marches in Pakistan. Every year, thousands of women come together to march the streets of cities such as Lahore and Karachi to advocate women’s rights in Pakistan and speak out against the harassment women face in such a conservative country. The online discourse surrounding this event has created a divide between online Pakistani communities. In 2018, the slogan “*Mera Jism, Meri Marzi*,” which translates to “*My Body, My Choice*” was created to represent the marches, and to fight for women’s rights to their bodies in particular. The slogan was leveraged to an even greater extent in 2019 through the marches and on social media. The intense backlash from conservative parties in Pakistan over the slogan created a nationwide online phenomenon and sparked discourse that would not have been as relevant as it became if it weren’t for the current technology and hashtag culture we have today. Despite an increase in dialogue, the threats from opposing parties and exposure from vitriolic online communities continue to spread hatred, coining the term as “too Western” in thinking and allowing men to oppose these ideals on social media using hashtags such as “WeRejectMeraJismMeriMarzi.” While this event created ripples in Pakistan and the South Asian communities, there was little to no news coverage about the Pakistani Women’s Marches in North America. In fact, the only way I, a South Asian woman, found out about it was through another South Asian friend of mine. Why is that the case?

Most North Americans believe that they are the driving forces for creating positive change and inclusivity. However, for a society that claims to be forward thinkers in the feminist lens, the difference between creating awareness around rights for Caucasian, privileged women and women from marginalized groups is staggering. As Marlene LeGates claims, the “we” that white, middle-class feminists have advocated for were presumed to include all women, (LeGates 2012, 2), without taking into account the diversity of women and the differences in their experiences. However, the oppression a Caucasian woman living in the United States experiences is not the same as a South Asian, Muslim woman living in Pakistan. The *Mera Jism, Meri Marzi* movement is something that white feminists haven’t experienced at all. The cultural context in Pakistan often

doesn't allow women to have the same privileges that they get within a North American cultural sphere, making their personal experiences with female oppression and feminist defiance (in short, what rights they are fighting for) to be very different. The North American woman who is able to work but doesn't get fair wages fights a different battle from a Pakistani woman who wants the right to complete a university degree and start a career. While both battles are extremely valid, North American feminists cannot compare their disadvantages to women in other parts of the world, especially considering the different cultural contexts in which women are oppressed.

According to Aída Hurtado (1989), in North American history,

‘White’ middle-class women are groomed from birth to be the lovers, mothers, and partners (however unequal) of white men because of the economic and social benefits attached to these roles. Upper- and middle-class white women are supposed to be the biological bearers of the members of the next generation who will inherit positions of power in society. Women of Color, in contrast, are groomed from birth to be primarily the lovers, mothers, and partners (however unequal) of men of Color, who are also oppressed by white men. (Hurtado 1989, 842-43)

To this day, white women hold importance and priority over women of colour within Western society as they are connected to the individuals who traditionally hold the most positions of power, and therefore their voices will most certainly be heard more than women of colour.

Even the big media and news outlets have traditionally been run by white men of power, and it is they who decide what the general public gets exposed to and not. By allowing feminist topics to be displayed on big media outlets traditionally set up and regulated by men, they are allowing women to destabilize the traditional, white male-dominated power structure and open up the potential for a multicultural female influence to come into the media, which would drastically change what the public is exposed to, and in turn, how the public reacts to certain social justice issues. These privileged men in power then come to see white feminism as less of a threat to the patriarchal structure that has been set up in North American media. This allows white feminists to speak their truth while fundamentally believing they are making the world a better place for women everywhere. In this way, white feminists are seen as the top of the chain within the marginalized female group, and it is what they advocate for and their power that gets exposed to the media and what North Americans hear about. Therefore, in this day and age, media outlets are more inclined to hear the voices of those women in power who have traditionally been their mothers, their lovers, and their partners, and are more aware of their struggles because they were surrounded by it. This often dismisses certain movements and feminist fights happening in other parts of the world, mirroring the imbalance in power amongst white women and women of colour within North America. Western media outlets censoring and concealing the experiences of women of colour around the globe is why I myself have not heard of the Aurat Marches until now.

It is important to note that times are changing. With social media sites taking over the news cycle and traditional news outlets becoming a dying industry sector, the internet is allowing people from all walks of life to share their stories and truths. It is something that is no longer dictated by patriarchal men who sanction what goes out to the general public and what doesn't. In short, anyone now has the power to speak their general truth. However, there also comes the problem of advocacy within the confines of social media's structure. While someone now may be allowed to

advocate for a cause, social media and the public can choose and regulate where and to whom this message gets spread to, providing freedom only to a certain limit and bringing in the topic of censorship. While the destabilization of white, patriarchal media structures is inevitable, there comes a new power of white feminism that masks and oppresses feminist advocacy in other parts of the world through social media's structures. For example, a body-positive post by a popular white, female celebrity will become more viral than a video of a Pakistani woman trying to advocate for women's rights in her own country. It is the job of feminist scholars and advocates in privileged areas of the world such as North America to bring these voices into the light and make others aware of their fights, and to give them support to have the right to their own bodies. It is the job of privileged feminists to advocate for our fellow women through social media, word-of-mouth, and campaigns to help bring their story to light. There are still many things that need to be improved upon, and I encourage us all to educate ourselves on important feminist issues from around the world, especially experiences that differ from our own, and take part in advocating women from all walks of life.

However, that is not to say that no progress has been made at all. While online conservatives had bashed the "Mera Jism Meri Marzi" statement, the slogan had also received positive responses from Pakistani feminists, as they continue to persevere and leverage the slogan to fight for bodily autonomy for women. While it may be hard for us to pack our bags and join the fight there, we *can* help these women by amplifying their voices through social media and leveraging our platforms to support those whose voices aren't reaching beyond their home countries. Even encouraging discussion within groups and through word of mouth is a powerful tool in amplifying mixed voices fighting for women's rights. Despite the lack of coverage in Western parts of the world, these marches show how similar to North America, women all over the world are fighting for their right to exist and thrive in a society traditionally set up by men. Despite cultural differences, each cause contains the essence of fighting for womanhood in a patriarchal society.

Fighting for basic women's rights such as having autonomy over our own bodies is political. Movements run by marginalized and racialized women not getting the attention they deserve are political. Having little to no media coverage about feminist movements around the world is political. Wanting power and freedom despite our backgrounds is political. Wanting the right to be ourselves is political.

The question is, what are Western feminists going to do about it?

References

- Chughtai, Alia. "Pakistani Women March for Equality, Gender Justice." *Al Jazeera*, March 8, 2019. www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/3/8/pakistani-women-hold-aurat-march-for-equality-gender-justice.
- Hurtado, Aída. "Relating to privilege: Seduction and rejection in the subordination of white women and women of color." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14, no. 4 (July 1989): 833–855, <https://doi.org/10.1086/494546>.

LeGates, Marlene. *In Their Time: A History of Feminism in Western Society*. New York: Taylor and Francis, 2012.