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Media Discourse and Gender Activism: Representation of Aurat March in Pakistani English Print Media, 2018–2025

Fozia Khalid
&
Salma Kalim
International Islamic University
Islamabad, Pakistan

Abstract

This study attempted to investigate the discursive construction, contestation, and legitimization of the Aurat March in Pakistani print media editorials. It analyzes the editorials from Dawn and The Express Tribune published from 2018 to 2025. Following Ruth Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach, the study examines the ideological meanings that are embedded in the editorials' coverage of the Aurat March movement. A qualitative textual analysis was conducted on a purposively selected corpus of editorials. The findings of the study demonstrate that Aurat March is predominantly portrayed as a moral, historically grounded, and socially significant movement, supporting democratic participation and gender equality. The most prominent strategy utilized in the editorials to legitimize the women's activism is the micro strategy of Argumentation. Nomination strategies established the movement as an inclusive coalition encompassing a variety of social groups, while the predicational strategies position the feminist actors as empowered and transformational agents of social change. The micro strategy of perspectivisation has also been employed to let readers view the movement from the perspectives of social justice and structural inequality. The study concludes that the editorials in Print media actively influence the ideological conceptions of feminism and contribute to the broader discussions on gender, citizenship, morality, and national identity.

Keywords: Feminism, Aurat March, Critical Discourse Analysis, Discourse-Historical Approach, Inequality.

Introduction

Pakistan witnessed the emergence of a feminist movement in March 2018 that has flourished over the course of nine years. According to Shah (2024), this March brought together thousands of people from diverse backgrounds and women's rights collectives to march against various forms of injustice. Since its inception, the Aurat March has become one of the most prominent and contentious feminist movements in Pakistan. It has generated intense public debate about gender, religion, morality, citizenship, and national identity. It promotes workplace equality, women's rights, bodily autonomy, protection from gender based violence, and more general social justice issues (Saigol & Chaudhary, 2020; Rahim & Riaz, 2023; Tabassum et al., 2023). Aurat March has

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emerged as a conflict and socio-public debate beyond the concept of social movement; its canvas is very wide encompassing feminist perspective, cultural aspect, gender relations, and social change. Aurat March cannot be marginalized up to political demands; it is associated with debate within public domain in its surroundings. This debate is intensified each year and people from different walk of life share their opinion. This debate brings under discussion the social issues, morality, religious, and cultural issues also. Therefore, this discussion is not only a political activity; in fact, it is also a discursive phenomenon, which takes new meanings and is negotiated constantly through language (Hassan et al., 2022).

The conflicting nature of Aurat March illustrates that social movement does not hold fixed meanings and their importance is identified through discursive practices, that shapes characters and their assigned identities maintains credibility. According to institutional guidelines use of language is central and should be used strategically. Institutions present movements in a specific manner based on their perceptions and ideologies. Among these media is the most significant institution. Editorials are core value, because they build newspaper's stance and social issue are highlighted explicitly (Richardson, 2007; Conboy, 2010). Through their argumentative structures and evaluative framing, they influence public opinions and ideological perspectives. Critical Discourse Studies views media discourse not simply as a neutral depiction of reality, but as a social practice that is responsible for the construction of knowledge, shaping public perception and reproducing or challenging existing power structures (Fairclough, 1995, 2003, 2013; Wodak, 2017). It implies that the representation of feminist movements in media is not the reporting of events but how legitimacy and meanings are constructed discursively. Thus, editorial discourse becomes an important tool for the analysis of these struggles in Pakistan, where debates about women's rights within religious, traditional, and nationalist frameworks have been common in Pakistan. Aurat March has become the visible site where these struggles take place.

Prior studies have enhanced knowledge on feminist resistance, digital activism, controversies, slogan politics, and ideological responses to the movement (Baig et al., 2020; Batool & Malik, 2022; Khushbakht & Sultana, 2020; Rahim & Riaz, 2023). However, little has been explored comparatively about how institutional media construct, negotiate, and legitimize the representation of movement through linguistic processes. There is a lack of systematic exploration, particularly on how editorial discourse utilizes various discursive techniques for the construction of social actors, making ideological claims, and validating feminist activism within the Pakistani context. To fill this gap, this study examines the discursive construction, contestation, and legitimization of the Aurat March in Pakistani Print media editorials from Dawn and The Express Tribune. These newspapers hold a significant position in Pakistan's public sphere and are considered among Pakistan's leading English-language publications. Their editorials serve as a rich

corpus for analyzing the institutional media engagement with discourses around gender, feminism, citizenship, and democracy. This study adopts the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) developed by Resigl and Wodak (2001) within Critical Discourse Studies. DHA focuses on the connection between linguistic choices and broader socio-cultural, historical, and political contexts that influence their production. It assumes that discourse is socially and historically situated. By anchoring the textual analysis in these broader contexts, DHA facilitates a deeper understanding of ideological discourse.

Theoretical Framework

The study is based on Critical Discourse Studies (CDS), an interdisciplinary approach which is concerned with the relationship between discourse, power, ideology, and social inequality. CDS views language as a form of social practice through which meanings, identities, and power relations are produced, reproduced, and contested, not only as a means of communication (Fairclough, 2003; Wodak, 2009). Within the wider tradition of CDS, this study employs the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) put forward by Ruth Wodak and Martin Reisigl as its primary analytical framework (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001; Wodak, 2015, 2017). This approach is chosen because of its focus on the historical and socio-political dimensions of discourse. In contrast to purely textual approaches, DHA connects language to wider historical, institutional, and ideological contexts (Wodak, 2015). By combining linguistic analysis with contextual and historical knowledge through its triangulation principle, it offers a comprehensive understanding of meaning construction. This makes DHA particularly suitable for examining the portrayal of Aurat March in relation to print media discussion about feminism, patriarchy, religion, morality, cultural identity and citizenship.

Following Reisigl and Wodak (2001), five key micro-discursive strategies: nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivisation and intensification/mitigation are focused on in the analysis. These strategies provide a systematic framework for examining how social actors are named and categorized, how attributes are assigned, how arguments are justified through particular patterns of reasoning, and how ideological positions are constructed through language. Particular attention is given to argumentation strategies and the use of topoi, which function as culturally shared warrants linking arguments to conclusions (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001). Topoi such as justice, history, culture, threat, responsibility, and human rights are examined to understand the editorial's justification for support or opposition to feminist activism.

Research Questions

1. How do Pakistani print media's editorials frame, challenge, and justify the Aurat March in relation to wider debates about gender, morality, and national identity?

2. How are the ideological meanings and power dynamics surrounding the March constructed, negotiated, and regulated in Pakistani print media's editorials employing DHA discursive strategies?

Significance of the Study

The research is significant as it contributes to the knowledge of how the public perception of feminist activism, gender equality, and social change is influenced by the media discourse in Pakistan. Through the analysis of the representation of Aurat March in elite print media during the last eight years, it demonstrates how media operates as an arena for ideological struggles about gender, women's rights, citizenship, and national identity. In this way, it contributes to Critical Discourse Studies. It also enriches scholarship on media representation of feminism using a Discourse-Historical Approach in order to reveal the linguistic mechanism behind the legitimization and contestation of the March. Moreover, it sheds light on the process of legitimization of feminist movements and their discussion in public spheres within the larger South Asian Context, where gender, culture, religion, and social justice are still very controversial. It further illustrates that within contemporary Pakistani society, language functions as a site of power, ideology, and social transformation.

Limitations of the Study

This study also has many limitations, which is a part of research journey. Since this study is conducted to analyze the editorials published in only two English-Language based newspapers, *Dawn* and the *Express Tribune* covering the time period from 2018 – 2025. This is why the findings cannot be generalized across entire Pakistani media. Secondly, this study has focused exclusively on English-Language newspapers, and none of the Urdu newspapers, social media or electronic media is included in this study Third, the research relies on a purposively selected corpus of 30 editorials. Finally, while the Discourse-Historical Approach ensured systematic rigor, qualitative textual analysis inherently involves an element of researcher subjectivity.

Review of the Literature

Evolution of the Women’s Movement in Pakistan

The women’s movement in Pakistan has undergone multiple historical phases that have been influenced by shifting political and social conditions. As noted by Batool and Malik (2021), the women’s movement in Pakistan has shifted from reform-oriented feminism in the early years of the state to street-based secular politics in the 1980s, followed by NGO-led co-optation in the 1990s and 2000s, and more recently toward debates on sexuality and body politics. The main focus of early post-independence activism was on welfare

initiatives, education, and social reforms, laying the foundation for organized women's activism (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987; Arab Naz et al., 2013). Later decades witnessed alternating periods of institutional support and legislative reforms, particularly during the regimes of Ayub Khan, Bhutto, Musharraf, and Zardari. However, during General Zia-ul-Haq's regime in the 1980s, the implementation of the Islamization policies marked a major setback because they restricted women's legal and social rights. As a result widespread resistance came up and feminist activist became more active and politically organized (Weiss, 2012; Yaqoob, 2021). Besides all the resentment women's movements continued and kept challenging discriminatory structures and the struggle in promoting gender equality through legal reforms. These efforts provided groundwork for the present-day feminist movements, for example, Aurat March. These movements sensitized people and raised their awareness, about gender-based issues like, inequality, economic injustice, and control over body and choices.

Women's Activism in the Digital Age

Women's activist movement in Pakistan entered into a new paradigm since 2013, and before that efforts for women's welfare, legal and political participation were initiated. In today's world role of media, intersectionality, and feminist movements marked their significant role. The emergence of movements like Aurat March, and #MeToo in 2018 became significant from local to global arena. These movements played a major role to provide unified platform for expressing the demands for control over body and choices, equality, and protection against all kinds of violence in a very vibrant way, unlike the scattered activist's movements of 1990's and 2000s. Some of the laws have been passed to show the recognition of some of the feminist concerns by the state. These laws include the Sindh Child Marriage Restraint Act (2014), Punjab Protection of Women against Violence Act (2016), and the Anti-Rape Law (2020) (Dawn, 2019; Petersen, 2020). These laws are frequently criticized by activists for being insufficient without wider societal transformation, despite the fact that they are very important. The post-2013 activism signifies a shift from earlier models focused on welfare or the state by explicitly challenging the patriarchy in both public and private spheres. Social media has also helped in making participation democratic by enabling women from all sections to express their demands (Saigol & Chaudhary, 2020; Usman, 2023).

Previous Scholarship on the Aurat March

There is a plethora of research that has examined the significance and controversy surrounding Pakistan's Aurat March within feminist discourse. Previous studies deal with the questions of ideology, media representation, class, religion, and language. They highlight the movement's importance along with its controversial approaches and discourse. Some studies have analyzed the Aurat March critically by contextualizing it in Pakistan. These studies argue that the movement's slogans and forms of expression are

considered incompatible with Islamic values and local cultural norms because they reflect secular or Western feminist ideologies (Ali et al., 2020). While these studies differ in their focus, ranging from concerns about linguistic appropriateness and moral boundaries (Naureen et al., 2020) to worries about ideological misunderstanding and public polarization (Khushbakht & Sultana, 2020), they all highlight the March as a challenge to Pakistan's prevailing moral standards. There are some other studies connected to these critiques that link resistance to the March with wider discussion on Islamophobia, class-based prejudice, and the circulation of feminist ideologies across the globe. They suggest that liberal feminist perspectives frequently portray Islamic societies as naturally oppressive, which misses the local religious traditions that actually support women's rights. Khushbakht (2022), indicated that such depictions actually shapes the global perception about Muslim women. Similarly Saeed and Batool (2021), presents totally different point of view, according to them this movement was lead by women of elite class, therefore, issues of common people remained unaddressed, whether it is about inclusion in the mainstream, education, and access to healthcare services etc.

But the contrast version of this movement is elaborated by some of Pakistani researchers is that it is a very strong struggle against patriarchy in Pakistan. They further assert that it strengthens and raises the voices for unprivileged class and challenges both the public and private domains. According to Sarwar and Huma (2021), argues that Aurat March has totally changed the feminist Activism methodology, whereas Rahim and Riaz (2013), emphasizes that it is still at grassroots level and has many loopholes and lacks in central organizational structure, though they all agrees up on a fact that this movement has provided a uniform platform to women of different socio-economic background. Furthermore, Batool and Malik (2011) investigates hoe effectively different medium of expressions like placards, slogans, and social media can function with a common goal of showing resistance. They express the everyday struggle women face with discrimination and exclusion. Some scholars have taken a more balanced view of the March. Farooq (2023), for example, points out that while the movement brings attention to key issues such as domestic violence, child marriages, and lack of women's agency effectively, its use of confrontational and symbolic language may push away people who support gender equality but are worried about changes that could challenge cultural and religious traditions. It moves the debate toward questions of strategy, sustainability, and long-term effect and draws attention to the diversity inherent in feminist activism within a society diverse in terms of religion and culture. Even though there is an ample amount of research on feminist activism, little attention has been paid to how elite print media frame, justify, or negotiate the March comparatively. The discursive mechanisms that underlie the editorial representation, however, remain underexplored. Therefore, a methodological Discourse-Historical Approach is required to examine the specific discursive and argumentative strategies in the March's construction and legitimization.

The current study fills this gap by analyzing editorials published in Dawn and The Express Tribune.

Research Methodology

The study employs a qualitative and interpretive research design. 30 editorials from two leading English–language Pakistani newspapers, Dawn (17) and The Express Tribune (13), are purposively selected. These newspapers were chosen for their wider readership, broad circulation, credibility, and consistent coverage of gender and social justice issues. This study follows a systematic coding process guided by the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA). Editorials were read multiple times and coded based on micro-strategies. They were analyzed in relation to the research questions and broader socio-cultural discussions in Pakistan regarding gender equality, patriarchy, and feminism. While primarily qualitative, simple frequency counts generated from deductive coding using Reisigl and Wodak's (2001, 2009) DHA categories were included descriptively. These frequency counts were added to emphasize the repeated patterns and support the qualitative findings rather than to offer statistical generalizations. The keywords Aurat March, women's rights, feminism, and Women's Day were used for editorial selection.

Analysis

Argumentative Strategies in the Legitimization of the Aurat March

It has been found that Argumentation strategies represent the most dominant discursive resource in the corpus, comprising approximately 45.8% of the analytical extracts. The editorials employ topoi: logical warrants that link specific arguments to broader conclusions (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001) to provide the foundation for legitimizing the Aurat March. By examining these topoi, we observe the media's construction of the March as a legitimate and necessary response to social crisis.

Aurat March is Justified using the Topos of History, Drawing upon Women's Resistance During *Zia's* Regime in one of the Editorials.

> **Extract 1: "***None of this is to say that women's mobilization in Pakistan is somehow unprecedented. The unrelenting resistance by Pakistani women against Zia's regime is imprinted on Pakistan's historical memory, and the iconic chaddar burning protests are a canonical visual in Pakistan's history of feminism"* (Dawn, March 12, 2018) (Shah, 2018).

The phrases *historical memory* and *chaddar burning protest* connect the contemporary women's activism in the form of Aurat March to the social and political history of Pakistan. The claim that Aurat March is a Western agenda imported from the West is countered here by normalizing it as an indigenous practice. It links the feminist activism to Pakistan's ongoing fight for rights and democracy. The March is justified using powerful lexical choices, *unrelenting resistance*, and *canonical visuals* as a continuation of Pakistan's well-established feminist history.

A second argumentative pattern found in the analysis is the topos of threat. It frames the March as a necessary reaction to the erosion of women's rights and shrinking democratic space. It is evidenced in Extract 2.

> **Extract 2:** *"We're living in a country where the space for dissent is shrinking every day"* (Express Tribune, March 9, 2018) (Basir, 2018, March 8).

Reisigl and Wodak (2009), claim that the topos of threat is frequently employed to justify the social action as a protective reaction against institutional oppression. Using this topos, the discourse presents the Aurat March as a defense of a larger democratic focus rather than a gender-based protest. The verb phrase *is shrinking* denotes a continuous erosion that demands immediate reaction, while the use of the metaphorical expression *space for dissent* metaphorically casts democratic participation as a constrained social space. The discourse here legitimizes the March as an essential intervention by portraying inaction as detrimental to civic freedom and democracy. While the previous extract emphasized the outside pressure on democratic space using the topos of threat, the following extract employs the topos of justice and equality to validate the March. It highlights the structural injustices that influence women's everyday experiences persistently.

> **Extract 3: "***Here there are laws aplenty to protect women, from sexual harassment, domestic violence, etc., but regressive social mores and an apathetic legal system remain major obstacles to implementing them. Millions of girls are condemned to a lower quality of life, simply on account of being born female"* (Dawn, 2022).

Here, we can see a gap between the social reality and constitutional promises in the discourse. The institutional failure is exposed using the phrase *apathetic legal system* while the *laws aplenty* acknowledge the existence of legislative frameworks. The March is further justified by highlighting the structural basis of gender inequality using the statement, "*girls are…..female.*" The same topos is employed through statistics on enduring gender-based disparities in the labour market in Extract 4. It demonstrates how this structural focus also extends to economic discrimination.

> **Extract 4:** *"A recent ILO report found that Pakistani women earn 25 per cent less than men per hour for work of equal value"* (Dawn, March 17, 2025) **(**Yusuf, 2025).

The incorporation of economic discourse into feminist discourse activates the DHA principle of interdiscursivity. Gender discrimination is shown as an observable social reality by quantifying the inequality through reference to an ILO report. It highlights the necessity of continued feminist advocacy. Drawing on the movement's historical legitimacy and the structural inequalities experienced by women, the editorials also employ the topos of responsibility. It extends the call for social change to wider society, especially men. It is exemplified in Extract 5.

> **Extract 5:** *"It's the duty of men to fall silent and stand behind in solidarity"* (Dawn, March 9, 2024) (Khan, 2024).

The term *duty* necessitates the defense of women's rights rather than considering it as an option. The current power dynamics are challenged here by transforming solidarity into responsibility. It urges men to take up the cause of gender justice. It frames the March not as a polarizing movement but a collective social project that necessitates mutual dedication. Overall, the argumentation serves as a principle strategy in the discursive construction of Aurat March as historically grounded, socially necessary, and morally justified, and a reaction to ongoing gender inequalities.

Construction of Agency, Resistance and Ideological Polarization through Predication

Predication emerges as the second most frequent strategy in the corpus, appearing in 25% of the analytical extracts. It legitimizes the movement, framing feminist actors as agents of change while challenging discourses that portray them as disruptive or culturally alien. One common pattern involves assigning transformative potential and agency to the March. Extract 6 illustrates this pattern by framing the movement as a powerful force for change, breaking long-standing quietness about gender related issues through positive lexical choices.

> **Extract 6**: *"However, the 2019 Aurat March shattered taboos by empowering women to discuss the everyday challenges they encounter within the confines of their homes, in markets, workplaces, and public spaces, without fear or shame"* (The Express Tribune, March 8, 2024) (Ahmed, 2024).

Aurat March is framed as a force that breaks down the oppression physically and socially. The transitive verb, *shattered* gives the March a powerful sense of change, attributing it as a force of "discursive rupture" that breaks historical silences. It aligns

with Fairclough's (2013) idea of discourse as a site of social struggle. So, the movement is predicated as an agent of radical change by shattering the status quo. By representing women who defy traditional gender norms, the discourse further constructs feminist agency in a more positive and empowering form. The following extract reveals how women from the middle class break the dominant ideals of femininity and respectability by participating in Aurat March.

> **Extract 7:** *"The march raised eyebrows because it broke the stereotype around the middle-class urban woman in Pakistan. The educated, working woman dressed in her best is not expected to break from her traditional image of a contributing but docile member of society and venture into the unpredictable world of activism"* (The Express Tribune, March 20, 2019) (Shabbir, 2019).

The micro strategy of predication is evident through a juxtaposition of the middle-class urban woman. While acknowledging her as *educated* and *working,* she is still expected to be "docile". It reveals a conditional nature of patriarchal acceptance. The phrase *broke the stereotype* implies that women's participation in the March is a bold challenge to the status quo. The use of metaphor, *raised eyebrows* further points out the unease surrounding the women's active involvement in politics. The editorial interprets the critique from the public as a response to the marchers' audacity, not as a sign of the movement's failure. The March is justified here as a forum where women claim their voices in public and political life confidently. The validation of the March is also constructed through ideological polarization, which can be seen in Extract 8.

> **Extract 8:** *"In the wake of the Aurat March, we must acknowledge that part of the opposition to the march was fuelled by the current wave of populist politics. The debate around the march has been polarizing: patriarchy vs. feminism, values vs. rights. But in the context of the global populist surge, such opposition is also about excluding an insurgent, outsider group in order to preserve the supremacy of a (fantastical) privileged majority"* (Dawn, March 9, 2020) **(**Yusuf, 2020).

The print media redefines populist opposition as an ideological construct while justifying the March as an essential step to attain reparative and moral justice. The phrase *current wave of populist politics* repositions local resistance within a larger framework of nationalist majoritarian politics that had exploded in 2020 when Aurat March faced intensified backlash in media, religious circles, and political debates. Through this move, the editorial goes beyond the gender issues toward a broader perspective on the struggles of identity, power, and social control. The paradoxes like *"patriarchy vs. feminism*" and "*values vs. rights"* create an "us" vs. "them" narrative (Malik, 2019). It indicates how

public discussions around the March became polarized into competing ideological camps that portray feminist activism as a potential moral threat. Through categorizations such as *outsider group* and *privileged majority,* the politics of othering is highlighted, where one group is framed as socially disruptive while the other as the legitimate mainstream whose dominance must be protected (Baig et al., 2020).

It aligns with Van Dijk's (2008) ideological square, which emphasizes positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation. Using these predicational choices, feminist activism is represented as an essential challenge to Pakistan's exclusionary, patriarchal, majoritarian socio-political configurations. This binary approach not only criticizes the political opposition but also highlights the potential of feminist unity to drive transformation in confronting deep-rooted resistance, as evidenced in Extract 9.

> **Extract 9:** (The Express Tribune, March 8, 2024). *"Despite facing opposition from conservative elements and entrenched patriarchal norms, the march exemplifies the power of collective action and solidarity in driving social change"* (Ahmed, 2024).

In this Extract, the use of attributes such as solidarity, collective action, and social change assigns positivity to the movement while characterizing its opponents as conservative. The March is constructed as progressive and transformative by portraying the patriarchal resistance as stagnant to social change. Following Van Dijk's (2008) notion of ideological polarization, the discourse highlights the positive image of feminist actors while showing oppressive structures in negative light. We can see that the micro strategy of predication is repeatedly employed in the discourse to describe the feminist actors as empowered, drivers of social change, and collective resistors while criticizing the ideologies and structures that stand against the March. Through this evaluative representation, the March is framed as a progressive force for social transformation.

Constructing Inclusive Collective Identity through Nomination Strategy

Nomination strategies comprise 12% of the analytical extracts. They are primarily realized through extensive enumerations and identity-based labeling. The editorials further highlight a wide range of people involved in March, rather than limiting it to a particular class, gender, or political constituency. This can be seen in Extract 10.

> **Extract 10:** "*Especially seeing the diversity of our new feminist movement - three generations of women, men, girls, boys, transgender people, minorities and persons with disabilities from various socio-economic and political backgrounds marching together, holding up thought-provoking placards, chanting slogans and singing and dancing, speaking out bravely and confidently"* (Dawn Editorial, 2019).

Reisigl and Wodak (2001) point out that nomination is a key strategy for shaping social groups and defining shared identities. In this case, this strategy is used to challenge the claim that the Aurat March is elitist, a foreign import, or only connected to the higher class. By highlighting a wide range of social actors involved in the March, the editorial frames it as a broad civic coalition. Identity-based phrases such as *three generations of women* and *people with disabilities* are frequently employed to show the social diversity at play. The editorial transforms the image of March from a narrow ideological group into a broad community of citizens by focusing on the participants from different backgrounds. A similar approach to nomination is seen in another editorial**,** where the movement is portrayed by including the marginalized communities whose experiences are often left out of mainstream public discourse. This wider articulation can be seen in Extract 11.

> **Extract 11: "***The Aurat March, which is a definitive marker of International Women's Day celebrations in this country, has evolved into an inclusive platform for marginalised voices resisting the status quo. Trans people, Baloch women whose loved ones have been forcibly disappeared, internally displaced women, women from urban centres and rural areas, all come together to draw strength from each other and from the inspirational battles that many of them have fought, and create networks for collective action"* (Dawn Editorial, 2021).

By uniting marginalized groups in their common struggle for social justice and democratic involvement, the discourse encourages intersectional solidarity. The inclusion of social actors like *Trans individuals….. Those from rural areas,* by acknowledging different regional, political, and social contexts, create a unified identity for the movement. By giving these voices a chance to be heard and recognized, this inclusive representation enhances the movement's overall credibility and legitimacy. The micro strategy of nomination further extends the inclusive nature of the March in the following Extract by mentioning multiple gender identities with a common framework of rights and citizenship. It represents a broader vision of democratic equality and a sense of collective identity, moving beyond the gender specific interests.

> **Extract 12:** *"Despite these laws being passed, there is little awareness of them among the general population, and a lack of sensitivity training for law-enforcement personnel. Until all forms of entrenched misogyny are rooted out, and until all women, men and transgender people enjoy complete equality before the law and until that law is implemented in letter and spirit the struggle for greater space, representation and respect will continue"* (Dawn Editorial, 2019).

The discourse here challenges the assumption that feminism serves only women by constructing the March as a part of a larger movement advocating for democratic equality. The incorporation of various gender identities in its pursuit of social justice frames the movement as a unifying force rather than divisive. So the struggle is depicted not as a conflict between males and females, but a shared effort to attain equality, respect, and representation for all citizens.

Construction of Moral Perspectives and Political Urgency through Perspectivisation and Intensification Strategies

The third most prevalent strategy identified in the analysis is the micro strategy of perspectivisation. It appears in approximately 16% of the analytical extracts. It functions as a discursive mechanism through which the editorials express particular viewpoints, evaluations, and ideological positions towards the Aurat March and its social actors. Extract 13 shows this strategy by incorporating the activist's voice.

> **Extract 13:** *"Sheema Kermani, one of the founding members of Aurat March, spoke to The Express Tribune about the theme for this year's protest in Sindh."The theme for this year's march is poverty and how it affects women in society. When there's hunger and a lack of food and resources, it not only affects a woman's physical health but also deteriorates their mental health and simultaneously affects her whole household," she said. "We demand to end hunger, to end poverty, and in my opinion, it is very possible*" (The Express Tribune, March 13, 2023) **(**Azeem Chughtai & Siraj, 2023; Siraj & Chughtai, 2023).

This editorial allows the movement to express its concerns directly by focusing on the perspective of founding member Sheema Kermani, rather than through the lens of outsiders. This approach moves the discussion of feminism away from general ideas about rights towards real-life issues such as health, poverty, and social welfare. The linking of women's oppression to hunger, lack of resources, and the well-being of society situates the March in the context of everyday material realities. The March is constructed here as a reaction to the social and economic challenges impacting women and their households. While the former extract expands the feminist concerns to include socio-economic issues, Extract 14 also employs this strategy to express a clearer moral judgment of opposition towards the feminist activism.

> **Extract 14:** *"What kind of twisted mindset considers it 'unseemly' to demand a right that is violated every time a woman is sexually harassed, raped, or subjected to domestic violence?"* (Dawn Editorial, 2023).

Through rhetorical questioning, this strategy works here to show the moral outrage towards gender-based violence and the attitudes that support it. The use of derogatory phrase*s and a twisted mindset* negatively portrays those who resist feminist demands, constructing their views as illogical and ethically weak. The enumeration of experiences such as *sexual harassment, rape, and domestic violence underscores* the real-world realities and justifies the women's call for equality and safety. This approach gives a justification for the March as a reaction to systemic injustices while undermining the discourses that try to minimize or ignore these issues. This moral evaluation is more pronounced in another editorial which directly criticizes political figures and institutions. As shown in Extract 15, the discourse stresses the need for political action and responsibility rather than just pointing out social problems.

> **Extract 15:** *"It is high time the people's representatives put their money where their mouth is and stopped pandering to misogynistic elements"* (Dawn Editorial, 2023).

The editorial's stance is further strengthened through the micro strategy of intensification. The use of the phrase *it is high time* "suggests that action is overdue and necessary right away. It further criticizes the politicians by highlighting a difference between what they say and what they actually do; using the idiom *put their money where their mouth is.* This extract clearly places the responsibility for social change on government institutions. To justify the March and its demands, this intensified viewpoint turns support for women's rights from a political choice into democratic duty. Together, these two strategies influence the readers' interpretation of Aurat March, its opponents and advocates. They validate the movement by framing it as a March that promotes social justice, equality, and accountability in institutions.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of this research show that the discourse surrounding the March in Pakistani print media editorials legitimizes it by depicting it as a struggle for gender justice. It is presented as a movement, which is firmly connected with social requirements and historical evidences. The results denied the claim that it is a foreign-funded or inspired movement, and furthermore, identifies that it is actually a struggle to strengthen democracy, and a broader scuffle for the attainment of social justice and constitutional rights. Addressing the first research question, findings reveals that the Aurat March movement is credible by reviewing the resistance displayed by women against General Zia-ul-Haq's regime. Aurat March is positioned within the context of indigenous feminist movements challenging the claim of Western import. These findings align with Zia (2020) while countering the perspectives of Khushbakht and Sultana (2020), Asfand (2020), and Saeed and Batool (2021). The findings link the March additionally to broader issues such as the decline of democracy, shrinking spaces for civic engagement, failure in

institutions, gender based violence, and economic inequality. To address these systemic crises, the March is presented as a vital reaction (Sarwar & Huma, 2021; Rahim & Riaz, 2023). For the second research question, the DHA strategies influence the ideological meanings being discussed. The topoi of history, threat, justice, equality, and responsibility are employed to support collective action (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001). The micro strategy of predication shows a polarization between feminist actors, presenting them in the discourse as resilient, empowered, and courageous while attributing patriarchal structures as stagnant and resistant to social change. It aligns with Van Dijk's (2008) model. The nomination strategy serves to position the March as a broad, civic coalition, countering the assumption of an elite-driven movement (Rahim & Riaz, 2023; Saeed & Batool, 2021). This representation is evident in the enumerative inclusion of men, women, transgenders, marginalized communities, and minorities in the print media's discourse surrounding the movement. Furthermore, institutional accountability and systemic injustice are highlighted using the micro strategy of perspectivisation. It suggests that the demands of Marchers are the structural solution, not a threat to culture.

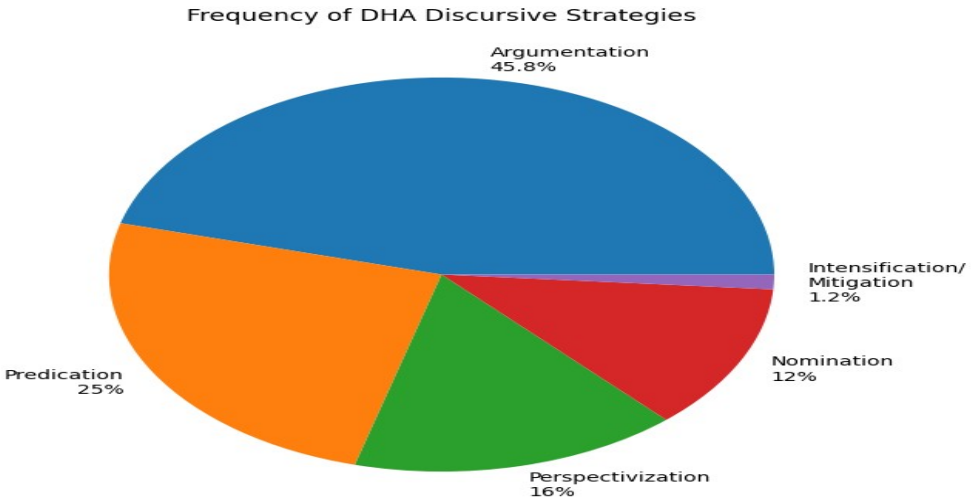


Figure 1: Frequency of DHA Discursive Strategies.
Adapted from Reisigl and Wodak (2001)

Conclusions

The study concludes that the Pakistani print media covered the Aurat March not only as an annual protest but as a significant site of ideological struggle over gender equality, citizenship, and social change. Editorials predominantly support the March by portraying it as a response to structural inequalities faced by women by situating it within Pakistan's own history of feminist activism. This analysis further identifies that print media influences social standings and appraises feminist movements. Editorials act as navigator

of diverse interpretations of feminism and national identity of women rather than being neutral. General perception of Aurat March in Pakistan is build from a controversial protest to discursively evolved movement and emerged as a symbol of inclusiveness, social justice and resistance in contemporary Pakistan.

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Fozia Khalid is an MS Scholar, Department of English, International Islamic University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

Dr. Salma Kalim is an Assistant Professor, Department of English, International Islamic University, Islamabad, Pakistan