We will not be Silenced: Solidarity with Pakistan's Women's Movement

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In Pakistan, violence against women and rape cases doubled in the last six months of 2020, cases of child abuse even tripled. Appalling as these figures are, they underestimate the true scale of the problem. Victims are often reluctant to register legal cases as they fear further abuse by the police, judges and public. On top of that, they have to fear revenge, even honour killings, by their own kin and family, who in most cases are the original abusers themselves.

It is under these circumstances that thousands of women took to the streets in Pakistan's urban centres to raise their voices in the fourth Aurat March (Women's March). The League for the Fifth International sees itself as part of this movement, and unconditionally defends the movement against any attack from the right.

This year's women's day was, indeed, a show of strength and pride and our comrades, male, female or non-binary, participated wherever marches took place. The protest was a reassurance that the country's Aurat March is here to stay. Despite the ongoing pandemic, thousands gathered to demand democratic, social and individual rights. The demands raised were not limited to those of the women's movement but also to the struggles of oppressed nationalities, religious and sexual minorities.

Since last year, the protesters have popularised the slogan of mera jism, meri marzi (my body, my choice), a slogan which we deeply support. This is because we are convinced that it is a woman's choice, indeed every individual's choice, to consent or to dissent to any physical or mental interaction. Every human being must enjoy the right to take informed decisions concerning their own body and actions, as long as they don't curtail any other person's freedom. By highlighting this simple concept, the slogan sums up the fight against abuse, harassment and rape.

Simply calling for an end to abuse, while completely correct, is a more limited demand. It focuses on curtailing abusers' denial of other people's rights. The abuser, most often a ?he?, remains the primary subject. Mera jism, meri marzi on the other hand clearly expresses that women, indeed all facing abuse, such as children, sexual minorities and the oppressed at large, are subjects in their own right. Only a society which accepts this will treat women as the equal humans they are. Only a society which fully embraces this understanding can fulfil one of the preconditions for realising humanity's full potential. Thus, Mera jism, meri marzi is a central democratic demand. To withhold support for the demand, or protection for those who raise it, therefore questions the democratic character of every party or governmental institution that does not support it.

This is the true context in which this year's backlash against the Aurat March unfolded. Pakistan's right-wing mullahs, whatever their claims, do not accept granting full human rights to women. Supporting them,
right-wing journalists and politicians unfolded a disgraceful smear campaign. They have shown themselves to be on the wrong side of history and, on top of that, ideologically bankrupt.

Unlike in previous years, in many cases they did not even bother to formulate reactionary arguments against demands brought forward by the march. Instead, they directly resorted to a campaign of fake news, creating false content with the help of deep-fake technology.

First, they claimed that protesters had carried the French flag in Islamabad. However, the flag carried was that of the Women Democratic Front, the main organiser of the capital's women's day protests. The organisation's colours are red, white and purple, representing socialism, peace and feminism. The Right's agenda was to paint the movement as a foreign conspiracy.

The truth is that while patriarchal oppression is a home-grown problem, it certainly is not limited to Pakistan. Patriarchal capitalism is a global phenomenon and women all across the world have been fighting it together for more than a century. The international socialist movement chose March 8 for global demonstrations in commemoration of a major strike by women textile workers in New York in 1908. Democratic rights of women and sexual minorities are no Western hypocrisy. They are hard fought for concessions that were wrested from the hands of the ruling classes, and the almost exclusively male governments, in those countries. Therefore, our movement should not be defensive about this tradition of internationalism. Instead, we have to educate ourselves as well as the Pakistani working class and women's movement about our proud struggles.

However, by playing the ?foreign? card, the right-wingers demagogically exploit real feelings of suffering from past and present imperialist domination. Nevertheless, their hypocrisy immediately becomes evident if we consider the silence on matters of actual imperialism by these self-declared ?anti-imperialists? who gained their arms from the US secret services in the 1980s, receive their funding from Saudi aristocrats, are silent about today's actual economic domination by Chinese and US capitalism and at the same time viciously defend laws like section 377 which were brought to the sub-continent by the British colonisers. For them, ?anti-imperialism? means withholding democratic rights and holding women in shackles.

The truth is that imperialist domination cannot be overcome by any right-wing nationalist conception. Such politics are always doomed to be anti-imperialist in words while remaining dependent on one or the other imperialist camp in deeds. Imperialism can only be overcome by an internationalist struggle of the oppressed worldwide. In this struggle, the Pakistani right-wing plays a destructive role, factually playing into the hands of imperialism.

Secondly, the mullahs claimed that the exhibition of a red scarf which read ?I was nine, he was fifty. I got silenced, his voice is still heard in the mosque today? was an act of blasphemy. This, they said, was a reference to the prophet (PBUH) and his wife Aisha. However, this is a lie. This particular scarf referred to an abusive Qari who had harassed a young girl who came to last year's Aurat March. It was part of protest art in Lahore in which victims of abuse, harassment and rape had been asked to hang up shirts or write about their experience on red scarfs.

It is an open secret that a large number of mullahs in Pakistan exploit their positions of power by abusing children mentally, physically and sexually. In this regard, they are no different from the predominantly male clergy in other countries or of other denominations. This is not a question of belief. This is a question of powerful men exploiting and betraying the trust that a dependent community puts in them. If anyone has committed a sin, it is those men who are covering their own crimes against the communities which they claim to represent, by manufacturing or spreading false information.
Third, a video of Karachi’s march had been remade with deep fake technology. Where in reality protesters shouted, ‘Mullahs should also listen?’, it now said ‘Allah should also listen?’. This is another attempt to divert attention from the actual culprit. What Aurat March demands is that mullahs must be accountable, too. They are humans like the rest of us and they must not enjoy special privileges. That they dare to avoid accountability by interchanging their name with the name of Allah subhanahu wa ta-ala, is shameful, distasteful and disrespectful to the Muslim communities which they claim to represent.

However, where words fail, force comes into play. And this is what those right-wingers have in mind. This is the reason for the Pakistani Taliban’s death threats to Aurat March organisers. Unable any longer to hide the daily violence in their homes, which is laid bare by the Aurat March’s revelations, slogans and demands, they now threaten to bring their violence to the streets. That this is the truth was laid bare by an attack on members of the Progressive Youth Alliance by the fundamentalist student wing Islami Jamiat-e-Talaba, simply because the former had organised a stall against harassment on a campus in Karachi.

Let us pause here for a moment. What are they trying to achieve with their violence and their threats? They want us to continue to bear the violence, in secret. Inevitably this would mean that the violence will continue. This is no option for us! We will never again be silenced.

However, this opens up an important scenario. It reveals that these forces feel seriously threatened. Indeed, even though the Aurat March does not yet represent a socialist and working class programme, the movement has successfully created a growing collective awareness among women of patriarchal oppression across all classes. This is a true achievement which no one can deny.

Nevertheless, the movement is clearly not prepared for an all-out confrontation with right-wing forces. The ideological impact that the Aurat Marches have made, is big, but it needs to be nurtured. Meanwhile, our forces do not yet match those of the Right, should it come to direct confrontations. While we must not give up any position, we must, so to speak, secure the trenches.

Practically, this means focusing on the transformation of the growing sympathies of working and lower class women into real support, participation and finally leadership of the women’s movement.

This will of course mean deepening the connections that have been established to working class communities and organisations. More than that, it will also mean bringing working women’s grievances, demands and strategies to the fore. Current movements, like that of the lady health workers in Punjab, are what we need to engage with and ultimately fuse with.

Some have criticised the Aurat March for being only a one day event. And yes, this is a problem. But we have to understand this question pro-actively. As socialists, we don’t think that criticism alone will bring us forward. Instead, we call on all those who want to build a working women’s movement, to pool our forces, experiences and already existing attempts. Ours is the only force we can ultimately trust in.

In a context of missing forces, it is understandable that leaders and those individuals who have become targets of death threats by the Pakistani Taliban have called on the state for protection. We acknowledge that they have every right to ask for legal and personal protection. Likewise, we think that the prosecution of those who spread fake news in defamation cases can be a valid tactic. This is not necessarily because it will stop them in the future, but because such a case can show to the nation all the facts, and the biggest of all that the Right wing are liars.

However, we must warn that the Pakistani state is, even towards upper middle class women, a fickle friend at best. Indeed, to the broad masses of women it is no friend at all. While many might be aware of this, it is
important to fully understand it, to really take it in, for our movement to prioritise the right things. Sometimes, looking a fearful situation consciously in the eye, with all clarity, is the only thing that gives us the strength in pursuing what is right.

Notwithstanding, morale is important, sometimes crucial in every struggle. To experience comradeship and solidarity is what breathes life into so many of our fights. For this reason, we appeal to the women's and workers' movements across the world to show solidarity with our movement. We ask you to hold discussions on our struggle, to publish articles on our fights, to organise protests and send messages of solidarity.

The biggest strength of our workers and women's movements has always been to fight together, to learn from each other in solidarity in our mutual struggles against oppression, capitalism and imperialism. We will not allow the Pakistani right-wing to take away our biggest strength from us.

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