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# Pakistan: Left-wing working-class women rally in Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi

World marks Women's Day hot on heels of rights demands

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**PAKISTANI LEFTWING WORKING-CLASS WOMEN ORGANIZED RALLIES IN ISLAMABAD, LAHORE AND KARACHI FOR EQUAL SPACE, RIGHTS AND AGAINST PATRIARCHY, EXPLOITATION AND RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM**



*ISLAMABAD: Activists of Women Democratic Front hold a rally on the occasion of International Women's Day outside National Press Club, Islamabad. Photo by Waseem Khan*

## HAH Special Report

Islamabad

Women organizations around the world mobilised Thursday to celebrate International Women's Day with Pakistani activists mostly socialist and working-class organisations marching in Islamabad, Lahore, and Karachi against rising violence, capitalism, feudal and tribal customs, patriarchy, rising tide of religious extremism and oppression on marginalized people and nations on peripheries. They demanded equal space, rights and opportunities in all spheres of life.

Women Democratic Front (WDF), a new socialist-feminist organisation, was launched at the National Press Club on Thursday.

Hundreds of delegates from Balochistan, Sindh, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab gathered at the first congress which elected Ismat Shahjahan as its president and Alya Bakhshal general secretary.



The delegates passed the front's manifesto and constitution envisaging a broad-based struggle against patriarchy, capitalism, national oppression, religious fascism and authoritarian political system.

Hundreds of working women, political activists, students and intellectuals gathered on the occasion to give the Pakistani women's movement a new lease on life.

Women rights campaigner Dr Farzana Bari, who was the guest of honour, took the oath of commitment from the office-bearers.

She expressed the hope that WDF would work together with workers, students and peasant movements for the rights of the oppressed nations to forge a genuine progressive alternative to the pro-establishment status quo political parties.

The newly-elected WDF President Ismat Shahjahan said that Pakistan is currently going through a critical period where right-wing extremism is on the rise, marginalised communities and nations on the peripheries are facing worst kind of state oppression; working class is subjected to economic and social exploitation, and forced into contractual or part-time jobs to become migrant labourer or face unemployment.

Addressing the delegates, Alya Bakhshal said the state ideology, structures, laws and policies were all based on patriarchal principles, on gender inequality, discrimination and violence in which women have been rendered as second class citizens and keep them in a state of virtual slavery.



Awami Workers Party President Fanoos Gujjar also spoke on the occasion and appreciated the efforts of the party's activists in organizing women on WDF platform. He extended his party's support to the front.

After the congress, the participants took out a 'Women's Freedom March' from the National Press Club to Nazimudin Road chanting slogans against violence, anti-women feudal and tribal customs, traditions and norms, exploitation of working-class women and girls.

Pakistan People's Party Senator Sherry Rehman and PPP women activists also joined the rally to express solidarity with the WDF.

In the congress a resolution was passed to condemn the rising violence against women and young girls, the brutal murder of a 12-year-old girl after rape at Mairabadi, a suburb of Islamabad, last night.



A delegation of transgender persons also joined the march and pledged to fight social discrimination.

A number of working-class organisations and parties including the Women's Action Forum, Young Teachers Association, Home-Based Women Workers Union as well as the AWP, Awami Jamhoori Party, Girls at Dhabas also attended the event, vowing to work together with the WDF to take forward both the women's movement as well as the cause of left-wing politics.

"I am proud to be part of Awami Workers' Party, the voice of the oppressed, the party which believes in equality for both men and women," said Dr Sayeed Tajik, a young activist from GB while attending the #Aurat AzaadiMarch in Islamabad on Thursday.

"Every country's story is incomplete without its women's voices. Pakistan is no different," wrote Senator Sherry Rehman on her post.

Conferences and rallies were organised by AWP in Lahore, Toba Tek Singh, Multan and Sanghar.

## LAHORE

Aurat March was also organised by AWP Lahore chapter with other organizations from across the. The march commenced from Hamdard Hall, Lytton Road to Charing Cross, on the Mall after speeches at Hamdard Hall. Prominent among the speakers were AWP Punjab Vice-President Professor Salahuddin, Advocate Siddique Ghuman, Liaqat Naseer, AWP Punjab general secretary Ehtasham Akbar and others. The participants raised slogans, carried a kaleidoscope of messages and walked in unison with their heads held high and spirits higher. Special tributes were paid to Asma Jahangir for her inimitable contributions to society and vowed to carry forward her legacy.



The march was led by AWP vice-president Abida Choudhry, Saleha Rauf and others demanding resources and dignity for women, for the transgender community, for religious minorities and for those on the economic margins but more importantly to recognise the fact that women's liberation is inherently linked with the liberation of all oppressed groups. These demands include, but are not limited to, an end to violence against women, labour rights, reproductive rights, environmental justice, anti-sexual assault laws, wage equality, fair political representation and opportunities, education equality, equality for the transgender community and an end to child marriage and honour killings. They also highlighted the struggles against land grabs/eviction of tenant farmers, ensuring food security for the masses, urban planning that centres ordinary people rather than security narratives, ending enforced disappearances.



The aim of the march, according to the organizers, was to try and build a movement that centres class and gender oppression, redistribution of economic and social powers, resources so that bonded labourers, domestic workers, home-based workers, agriculture and factory and sex workers are liberated from the confines of the feudal-capitalist-patriarchal system. Where the concerns of working women, transgender women, students and those who are excluded from challenging social and economic norms and violence are heard loud and clear in political mobilization. To ensure that feminists are part of larger movements at both the local and national levels for issues such as respect for work both at home and outside, equal pay, access to affordable public transport, housing, public spaces, to clean drinking water and emancipatory education, an ecologically safe environment. “We believe that a different world is possible and this March was a step in that direction. Together we aim to be able to struggle to create a society where we can live with dignity”, says a statement issued by the organisers.

## KARACHI



The Aurat March in Karachi attracted thousands to gather and support the cause of women empowerment and recognise their struggle through centuries.

The march in Karachi first had a variety of speeches and skits, poetry and songs at the Frere Hall after which the participants from diverse classes, ethnicities and sections of society mostly students from universities and colleges came together under the banner of ‘Hum Aurtein’ for a cause marched.



The participation of marginalised groups such community was the transgender mingled around. Representatives of lady health workers who face threats and harassment as well as economic uncertainty were also present to defend their rights. Representatives of the Dalit community raised increasing incidents of harassment and sexual abuse as well as forced conversions. Members of the Christian community raised their voice for women of all religions to be given security by the state and society.

Freedom, respect, the right to live on their own terms, an end to violence against women, economic

and reproductive justice, reclaiming public spaces and making streets safe for women, were some of the demands put forward at the march.

The UN's Gender Parity report shows that in 2017, Pakistan ranks the lowest at 143 out of 144 in the world in terms of economic participation and opportunity for women.

*[Elsewhere in the world...]*

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**P.S.**

\* March 09, 21:08, 2018:

<http://thehighasia.com/world-marks-womens-day-hot-on-heels-of-rights-demands/>