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‘Hijab marches’ compete with Pakistan’s International Women’s Day rallies

Thursday 30 June 2022, by [JANJUA Haroon](#) (Date first published: 9 March 2022).

Minister says women’s march violates Islamic values, prompting counter-events organised by religious groups

More than 1,000 veiled women attended marches to promote Islamic values in cities across [Pakistan](#) on International Women’s Day in an attempt to counter pro-gender equality rallies.

In Islamabad and Karachi, well-attended “hijab marches”, organised by religious groups, competed with those participating in *aurat* – Urdu for women – rallies, which call for an end to systemic discrimination in the country.

The aurat march has been held each year on 8 March – International Women’s Day – since 2018, and organisers have faced numerous death threats as well as accusations of taking foreign funding to promote obscenity.

[Last month](#) Pakistan’s minister for religious affairs, Noor-ul-Haq Qadri, opposed the aurat march, and said it violated Islamic values. He demanded that the prime minister, Imran Khan, rename 8 March as Hijab Day, which prompted Tuesday’s counter-marches.

“Every year on our day religious Islamist parties threaten our march and oppose it, but Pakistani women will continue our struggle and we will counter this opposition for our rights,” said Farzana Bari, one of the aurat organisers.

Hira Ali, a university student from Islamabad, where men [hurled stones](#) at marchers in 2020, said: “The Islamists came out to suppress our voice and we will not allow them to oppose our right to protest and we own our public space.

“The perpetrators of violence against women often walk away without facing punishments and we will fight against the injustices,” she said.

In the past there has been controversy among conservative and religious circles over the slogans and placards used in the march, primarily: “My body, my choice” and “Stop being menstrual-phobic”.

Authorities in Lahore urged organisers to cancel the event there on security grounds, and threatened not to provide security for the marchers, but after a legal challenge in the city’s high court the march went ahead.

Fabricated videos and fake images of last year’s International Women’s Day march were circulated online and appeared on TV shows falsely accusing women of chanting blasphemous slogans, which carries the death penalty in Pakistan.

Over the past four years the aurat march organisers have claimed victories for gender equality, for example last year's [ban on the "virginity test"](#) for female rape victims in Punjab. But the flood of threats and online abuse have led march organisers to deactivate their social media accounts.

Last year's [Global Gender Gap Report](#) by the World Economic Forum ranked Pakistan 153 out of 156 countries.

Haroon Janjua

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