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Internship with Aurat Foundation, Pakistan

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Introduction: Aurat Foundation

Aurat Foundation has been working to address hate since 1986, specifically against women. The organization is built on the collective values and struggles of women who have long fought to establish their rights and presence as equal members in a highly patriarchal society. This internship was not only an asset in terms of the skills I acquired and the network I built, but more so a look into the trickle-down effects of the global rise in hateful tendencies, including misogyny, religious extremism, and inter-ethnic divisions within a country.

Aurat Foundation works specifically on addressing misogyny and making sure Pakistani women are protected against gender-based hate, discrimination, and violence. Among its key thematic areas of focus are women's economic and political empowerment, ending violence against women and girls, women's health and education, and access to legal justice and rights. They do so by running donor-funded projects and working in tandem with the government to devise policies and formulate legislation to protect and support women in the country. One of Aurat Foundation's biggest assets is its positioning within the politics-civil society spectrum, where, given its strong connections with parliamentarians and government officials, the organisation often becomes the bridge between other civil society actors and the government. Thus, Aurat Foundation's operations to address its focal issues are twofold: 1) working directly with the end recipient for donor-funded projects, and 2) working with the state to bring societal change by leveraging its on-ground knowledge and expertise.¹

¹ Aurat Foundation, "*Vision, Values and Goals*," accessed September 10, 2026, <https://af.org.pk/files/brochure/Vision%20Values%20and%20Goals.pdf>

Their literary foundations are also very interesting to shed light upon. Aurat Foundation took shape in 1986 after years of struggle by the feminist group “Women’s Action Forum,” which contributed to the efforts toward challenging Islamist military dictator Zia ul Haq. Some of the leading activists of this group, after almost a decade of violations of their rights, moral policing, police brutality, arrests, and the deteriorating conditions of the lives of women in the country, finally registered as an NGO to tackle these issues systematically. However, what is more interesting is that most of these women belonged to an educated upper class. So while they had influences of more established non-Pakistani feminist thinkers in their work, this movement and organization is almost entirely built on homegrown ideologies and frameworks by female lawyers, economists, as well as women from other professions, poets, and academics of the time.²

Some of the organisation's earliest achievements include the repealing of the Hudood Ordinance — a law that stated women would be punished for reporting rape if they failed to produce four eye witnesses — following their tireless advocacy, and the rehabilitation of internally displaced people (IDPs), especially women, after major natural disasters in the country.

My Involvement

1) Donor-Funded Projects and International Involvement

Since its inception in 1986, Aurat Foundation has successfully executed countless donor-funded projects. Some of Aurat Foundation’s most prominent donors include: UNDP, UN Women, Oxfam, the EU, SAP, and previously, USAID. These projects have ranged from rehabilitation of female prisoners into mainstream society to Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) projects for women in remote areas of Pakistan.

Currently, the Aurat Foundation is working with various multinational organisations in an attempt to promote eco-feminist practices and make sure that Pakistani women don't get left

² Ayesha Khan, “*The Women’s Action Forum Never Claimed to Represent All Women in Pakistan*,” Dawn Images, March 13, 2019, <https://images.dawn.com/news/1182032>

behind in the race towards climate protection and sustainability. This includes working with organisations such as the GIZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, Germany) to ensure that female workers employed in factories exporting textiles to the EU are protected financially through equal pay, and their wellbeing is prioritised by introducing better working conditions such as paid maternity leave and adequate access to clean toilets in the workplace. The Green Button 3.0 workshop organised by GIZ Pakistan invited civil society actors to share their input on working conditions and labour rights in textile factories across Pakistan producing export goods for the German market. As a representative of Aurat Foundation, my focus remained on highlighting the challenges faced by women working in the sector and how they can be addressed.

Additionally, given the organisation's position in the civil society sector, they are also recognised as an important voice for women's representation by actors like the Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre (ADPC). During my internship, I had the opportunity to be a part of one of these consultations, where I participated in a two-day training conducted by the Ministry of Climate Change, Pakistan, and the ADPC on preparing proposals for Green Climate Fund (GCF) funding for precision agriculture and adaptation in Pakistan. Aurat Foundation's input became invaluable to the training, given the GEDSI requirements and components for securing any project funding. As part of Aurat Foundation's delegation, my task was also to highlight how women get sidelined in relief and rehabilitation efforts in climate change-related disaster-affected areas in Pakistan, during presentations and breakout group consultations with members of different government and civil society sectors as well as members of the ADPC.

2) Working with the Government

The second area is where most of my time at Aurat Foundation was dedicated. Since 2002, Aurat Foundation has become a prominent lobby for putting women's rights and welfare on the agenda in the parliament and national assembly. One of the ways this is done is by inviting members of parliament (MPs) to attend retreats and trainings where members from Aurat Foundation participate in consciousness-raising, so that the MPs are made aware of the most pressing issues

affecting women in their districts. Following that are drafting sessions where the foundation and the MPs work together to formulate laws that can help solve and address the issues facing women in their districts. These drafts are then presented and debated by the MPs. What Aurat Foundation does in this case is fill a very vital information gap between the local population and the members of parliament by already doing the work of assessing and surveying the on-ground situation. For this to happen effectively, the Aurat Foundation has established Citizens' Action Committees (CACs), Peace Committees, and Women Leaders Groups (WLGs) across the country to make up for the lack of a local government channel in Pakistan.

During my time at Aurat Foundation, I was able to work on two prominent legislative and governance-related projects. Firstly, the drafting of the Punjab Climate Change Act 2026 with the Government of Punjab and the Barki Institute for Public Policy. Aurat Foundation's focus remained on bringing attention to the disproportionate effects of climate change faced by women in climate change-affected areas, especially in rural and southern parts of Punjab. These issues include non-prioritisation during relief and recovery operations, loss of livelihood, the threat of increased GBVH, and lack of access to safe sanitation, among others. Our goal was to push for a more substantial, actionable step towards addressing these challenges. While mentioning women and using gender-conscious language in provincial action plans is a step forward, it is still too far from solving the challenges women in climate change-affected areas face.

The second project I was able to contribute to was assessing the implementation and impact of the Punjab Women Development Policy in the contemporary context. My work in this project included extensive research and background study of women's representation in local governments in Pakistan, analysing the proportion of women elected representatives who made it to parliament in the last two decades, and their achievements and challenges during the last three local government tenures.

This work was especially important to me as I aspire to work in public policy, and getting first-hand experience of what goes into the drafting and implementation of legislation was invaluable.

The Foundations of Aurat Foundation and its Understanding of Misogyny in Pakistan Today

During my internship, I was able to interview my direct supervisor, Nabeela Shaheen, but equally importantly, on-the-ground activist and peace advocate, Amna Malik, who credits her work wholly to the empowerment offered by the organisation and its agenda. For context, Amna comes from a remote village in Punjab, and it is extremely uncommon, and highly frowned upon, for women of her background to be involved in such bottom-up activism. My interview with Amna was recorded, and the full transcript can be found [here](#) (with AI-generated English translations). Here are some reflections from my interviews with these colleagues:

1) How does Aurat Foundation look at hatred and what do they do to address it?

In my interview with Amna, she defines hatred as the absence of peace and harmony:

“I am a peace architect. Basically, all the projects I have undertaken have been under the banner of Aurat Foundation, and it was through Aurat Foundation that I came to understand how important peace is for our society and for establishing harmony throughout the world. Thousands of languages are spoken across the world, but there is one language that is the same everywhere, and that is the language of peace. And if you remove the language of peace, we become divided by caste, by colour, by race, by nationality, and the biggest problem that then emerges is that we fight; we partition countries.”

For Pakistan, as a postcolonial, multiethnic, and multi-religious country, her work’s value is immeasurable. A big part of Amna’s work includes visiting churches, mosques, and other religious institutions to establish or revive ‘peace’ committees and include women in them:

“We also met with the Gurdwara community and told them to restore their peace committees and make women’s participation mandatory, so that neighbourhood conflicts that escalate from scuffles to law-breaking can be resolved through dialogue. We said: education is a woman’s right; give women the right to education; let the rule of law prevail.”

Nabeela shares this view and spends most of her time devising and proposing unique strategies to government-level stakeholders, including union councils and members of parliament, to combat the rising misogyny in Pakistani society. One of the most pressing concerns for a Pakistani woman's life, according to Nabeela, is her complete unawareness regarding her rights before, during, and after the dissolution of marriage that both the state and Islam provide her. This leads to women spending decades of their lives in abusive relationships for fear of social and religious ostracisation at the prospect of speaking up. She believes this lack of education, compounded with increasingly patriarchal mindsets of young men, is causing the gender ideology gap to widen, and is a strong proponent of mandatory counselling before a couple is allowed to register for marriage. During my time at Aurat Foundation, I also had the opportunity to sit in on Nabeela's meetings with the National Lobbying Delegation — a group of lawyers, activists, and working female professionals — to come up with the best strategies to mitigate this information gap on marital rights for Pakistani women on a governmental scale.

While the nature of Amna's work is more geared towards the macro and outreach, people like Nabeela form the engine room of the organisation.

2) What is the impact of geopolitical developments on the organisation's fundraising and operational capabilities?

Much of Aurat Foundation's work depends on funding from international organisations like UN Women, UNDP, USAID, the European Union, Oxfam, and others. In conversations with colleagues, I received confirmation of what I had so far only been hearing on the news: liberal backsliding across the globe was having a rapid trickle-down effect on organisations working in contexts like Aurat Foundation's, as funds for development and welfare-related projects — which were once considered a benchmark of soft power — were being reallocated towards defence spending. Furthermore, the shutdown of USAID and US withdrawal from major UN programmes affected many upcoming and ongoing projects, as Nabeela confirmed.

The results of these developments are devastating. When I first started following Aurat Foundation's work as a teenager, I saw an organisation that was thriving. Today, the Lahore office that once had multiple internationally funded projects operating at the same time and a team of at least 15 to 25 people has been reduced to three staff members, trying to keep the organisation alive and raise awareness about the fact that this work, if anything, is more important today than it was ten years ago.

Final Reflections

Misogyny, in Pakistani culture, is deep-rooted within societal values. From the tiniest micro-aggression to physical violence, the state of women in the country remains deeply vulnerable. And when a country consistently ranks in the bottom five on the Global Gender Gap Index year after year, the work of organisations such as Aurat Foundation becomes increasingly pertinent.³

What struck me most over the course of this summer is just how wide the gap is between policy on paper and lived reality. Pakistan has constitutional provisions for gender equality, UN commitments it has signed up to, and a civil society that is articulate, passionate, and extremely capable. And yet, as both Nabeela and Amna made clear, the machinery that is supposed to translate those commitments into change moves extraordinarily slowly, if at all. The USAID shutdown alone sent shockwaves through organisations like Aurat Foundation that had built years of programming around that funding stream. What this summer taught me is that the work of addressing gender-based hate is not linear.

I also came away with a much more nuanced understanding of what misogyny looks like in a postcolonial context. The conversations I had with Amna, in particular, complicated easy narratives. Her work is not framed in the language of 'women's rights' as a western import — it is grounded in Islamic and cultural scholarship. This is not incidental. It reflects a deliberate

³ World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report 2026*, "Benchmarking Gender Gaps 2026: Global Results," accessed September 2026, <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2026/in-full/benchmarking-gender-gaps-2026/#global-results>Western

strategy to meet communities where they are, to use the very frameworks those communities consider sacred to make the case for women's inclusion and dignity. I think that is one of the most important things I will take away from this experience: that effective advocacy against hatred is almost always contextual, and rarely universal.

I also gained firsthand insight into something I had read about in the abstract: the funding crisis for civil society in the Global South. The shrinking of Aurat Foundation's Lahore office from a full team to three people is not just a staffing statistic. It represents years of institutional knowledge, community relationships, and ongoing projects that simply cannot be maintained at that scale. The organisations doing the most important work are often the most structurally vulnerable, and the global shift toward defence spending over development is being felt acutely at the ground level in places like Lahore.

On a more personal note, this internship gave me a sense of what it means to work within a system while also pushing against it. Aurat Foundation does not exist outside the state; it works through it, around it. That kind of pragmatic, sustained engagement is something I hope to carry into my own work in public policy. I am grateful to BCSH for making this summer possible.

Photo Gallery:



GIZ Green Button 3.0 workshop (*left*) and HRDD Consultation (*right*)



A day representing Aurat Foundation at the Human Rights Commission Pakistan



Interview with Amna Malik (*left*) and ADPC Training (*right*)

References

1. Aurat Foundation. "Vision, Values and Goals." Accessed September 10, 2026.
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