

Aawaz II

Inclusion, Accountability, Reducing Exploitation

Inclusive Leadership Pathways

*From Participation to
Community Recognised
Leadership*

Case Study

June 2026

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Acknowledgements:

This document is one of a series of research studies commissioned by Aawaz II, British Council. We acknowledge the efforts of Akademos, the research supplier for Aawaz II. The technical guidance and extensive support of the Aawaz II team throughout the process was invaluable. The research would not have been completed without the field support of Aawaz II district and provincial partners. Most of all, we acknowledge the insights, time and contributions of Aawaz II community members. Their voluntary spirit and commitment to social change are inspiring.

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Acronyms

AAC	Aawaz Aagahi Centre
ACA	Aawaz Change Agent
CNIC	Computerised National Identity Card
CPU	Child Protection Unit
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DC	Deputy Commissioner
DF	District Forum
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FP	Focal Person
GBV	Gender-based Violence
KII	Key Informant Interview
KP	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
LG	Local Government
NADRA	National Database and Registration Authority
PWDs	Persons with Disabilities
RP	Resource Person
SIG	Special Interest Group
VF	Village Forum

Executive Summary

Leadership and decision-making within communities in Pakistan is often shaped by gender norms, social hierarchies and access to public spaces and institutions. Women, persons with disabilities (PWDs), transgender persons, religious minorities and marginalised youth have limited access and often face barriers to participation, visibility and influence within local governance and community processes. While formal policies and institutional mechanisms promoting inclusion have expanded, leadership opportunities for marginalised groups remain uneven and are frequently constrained by stigma, mobility restrictions, unequal social recognition and limited institutional responsiveness.

Within such contexts, leadership often emerges not through formal authority, but through everyday practices of problem-solving, mediation, community support and engagement with institutions. Community recognised leadership is, therefore, closely linked to trust, social legitimacy, participation and the ability to mobilise collective action within socially constrained environments.

The Aawaz II programme, implemented in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), aims to address exclusion and strengthen inclusion through participatory and community-based engagement platforms, including Village Forums (VFs), District Forums (DFs), Aawaz Aagahi Centres (AACs) and youth-led initiatives. These spaces enabled interaction across social groups and created opportunities for women, PWDs, transgender persons, religious minorities and marginalised youth to participate in dialogue, collective action, referrals and community problem-solving processes.

Drawing on qualitative evidence from six districts across Punjab and KP, alongside programme documents, annual reports, behaviour change materials and community-level evidence generated through

Aawaz II platforms, this study examines how inclusive and community-based leadership emerged within Aawaz II communities, the conditions under which leadership gained legitimacy and the factors that enabled or constrained participation and influence for marginalised groups. The analysis explores how leadership pathways differed across social groups and how broader social norms, identity and institutional relationships shaped opportunities for influence and recognition.

Key Findings

Key findings indicate consistent patterns in the emergence of community-based leadership, strengthened participation and evolving community-institution linkages across districts.

1. Community-based leadership emerged through everyday action and problem-solving.

Participants consistently defined leadership not through formal authority or official positions, but through practical action, support for others, mediation, referrals and community engagement. Individuals who solved problems, facilitated access to services, supported vulnerable groups or mobilised collective action were increasingly recognised as leaders within communities, even where they did not hold formal authority.

Leadership, therefore, emerged as a relational and community-recognised process shaped by trust, credibility and sustained engagement rather than by institutional designation alone.

Programme documentation and annual reports similarly demonstrate that Aawaz II community forums, including VFs, AACs, ACAs, women-led collective action initiatives and Special Interest Groups (SIGs), enabled women and other marginalised groups to engage more actively in referrals, advocacy, citizen-state engagement and collective problem-solving processes.

2. Participatory spaces enabled pathways from silence to influence.

Inclusive and participatory spaces created through Aawaz II enabled many women, youth, PWDs, religious minorities and transgender persons to gradually move from passive participation into more active and visible community roles. Repeated participation in meetings, forums, awareness sessions and collective activities strengthened confidence, communication and willingness to engage publicly.

These pathways were experienced differently across social groups. Women often associated leadership with confidence and support to others, while young people frequently framed leadership in terms of awareness raising and social change. PWDs highlighted the importance of overcoming assumptions regarding capability and dependence.

Programme evidence further suggests that participatory spaces, community networks and collective engagement platforms played an important role in strengthening confidence, visibility, collective action and interaction with institutions among marginalised groups.

3. Leadership legitimacy is shaped by gender, identity and social position.

Although leadership opportunities expanded for many participants, leadership legitimacy remained uneven across identities and social groups. Women, transgender persons, PWDs, religious minorities, marginalised youth experienced more scrutiny, social resistance and barriers when attempting to take on public or influential roles.

Family support, mobility, education, socio-economic position and existing social status influence whose voices carry authority and whose contributions are recognised within community settings. Leadership pathways are, therefore, not experienced uniformly, reflecting intersecting inequalities and differentiated opportunities for influence.

4. Trust, networks and institutional engagement strengthened leadership sustainability.

Leadership was sustained not only through individual motivation, but through collective support systems, peer encouragement, trusted relationships and visible institutional engagement. Community actors increasingly facilitated referrals, accompanied individuals to institutions and supported access to services such as documentation, social welfare support and protection mechanisms.

These interactions strengthened both community trust and leadership legitimacy while also creating stronger connections between communities and institutions.

At the same time, leadership gains are vulnerable to financial pressures, social backlash and the absence of regular opportunities for collective engagement, highlighting the importance of sustaining supportive networks and community spaces over time.

Taken together, these findings suggest that inclusive leadership within Aawaz II communities emerged primarily through sustained participation, trust-building, collective engagement, citizen-state interaction and practical action rather than through formal authority alone. However, leadership opportunities and legitimacy continue to be shaped by intersecting inequalities and by the availability of enabling social and institutional environments.



Recommendations

The findings highlight the need to strengthen, broaden and sustain community-based leadership pathways by embedding inclusive participation and engagement more consistently within existing governance, outreach and service-delivery systems.

For Government Actors

1. Strengthen institutional engagement with community-based and informal leaders.

District administrations, Local Government (LG), Social Welfare and Women Development Departments should strengthen regular engagement with a wider range of community-based actors, including women leaders, youth volunteers, transgender representatives and community intermediaries who already support referrals, mediation and community mobilisation. Such engagement should be integrated within existing outreach, safeguarding, referral and citizen engagement mechanisms, while strengthening coordination between communities and service providers.

2. Expand accessible community-level engagement spaces.

Government departments should strengthen safe, accessible and locally embedded engagement spaces that enable sustained participation in dialogue, collective action and local problem-solving for women, PWDs, transgender persons, religious minorities and marginalised youth. Approaches should be tailored to address barriers experienced by different groups, including mobility restrictions, accessibility needs, stigma, institutional mistrust and restrictive social norms.

3. Integrate inclusion and community engagement approaches within routine frontline training systems.

Social Welfare, Women Development and LG Departments, police

training schools and other frontline institutions should integrate practical training on inclusion, respectful engagement, referral sensitivity and interaction with marginalised communities into existing training systems. This should include attention to gender norms, disability inclusion, transgender inclusion, minority rights and non-discriminatory practices.

4. Strengthen continuity between community engagement processes and institutional response systems.

District administrations, Social Welfare and Women Development Departments, National Database & Registration Authority (NADRA) facilitation centres, CPUs and related service-delivery institutions should strengthen coordination pathways between community platforms and institutional actors to improve referrals, follow-up and responsiveness.

For Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and Development Partners

5. Continue investing in participatory and collective community spaces.

CSOs and development partners should continue supporting long-term participatory platforms that create opportunities for confidence-building, dialogue, mentoring and collective action among marginalised groups.

6. Move beyond representation towards leadership pathways.

Programming should move beyond numerical participation targets and support progressive leadership pathways that combine mentoring, practical action, referrals, institutional engagement and opportunities for community mobilisation. Particular attention should be given to individuals who face greater social risks when assuming visible community roles.

7. Strengthen peer networks, mentoring and collective support systems.

Programmes should strengthen mentoring relationships, peer learning opportunities and support networks that reduce isolation and help emerging leaders navigate backlash and social pressure. Cross-community exchanges and intergenerational learning should also be encouraged to broaden leadership opportunities and strengthen solidarity across groups.

8. Preserve flexible and inclusion-centred engagement approaches.

Programmes should remain attentive to unequal power dynamics and encourage broader participation and leadership opportunities to avoid concentration of influence among a limited number of actors.

9. Strengthen pathways from participation to institutional engagement.

CSOs and development partners should continue supporting referrals, institutional linkages and structured opportunities for engagement with public institutions. These pathways should remain accessible to individuals with limited mobility, weaker social networks, lower literacy levels and those facing stigma or discrimination because of gender identity, disability, religion or economic vulnerability.

10. Generate further evidence on community-recognised leadership.

Future programming and research should continue examining how legitimacy is negotiated, how leadership becomes socially accepted and how leadership pathways differ across gender, disability, religion, age and socio-economic position.

Inclusive Leadership Pathways *From Participation to Community Recognised Leadership*

1. Introduction

In Pakistan, access to leadership roles within communities is shaped not only by individual capacity or aspiration but by entrenched social hierarchies, gender norms and structures of exclusion that determine whose voice is considered legitimate, whose concerns are acted upon and who is trusted to influence decisions. For women, persons with disabilities (PWDs), transgender persons, religious minorities and marginalised youth, these structural and relational barriers mean that informal influence, however meaningful in practice, often goes unrecognised. Leadership in many community settings continues to be associated with formal authority or ascribed social status, leaving community-embedded forms of initiative and problem-solving exercised by marginalised individuals largely invisible within both social and institutional processes.

Evidence from Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), however, indicates that where enabling conditions such as inclusive participation, trust-based relationships and access to collective platforms are present, individuals from marginalised groups are increasingly taking on active and influential roles by mediating disputes, facilitating access to services, mobilising communities and engaging institutions on behalf of others. These pathways are shaped differently across gender, age, disability, religion and socio-economic position, raising important analytical questions about how leadership emerges, gains legitimacy and is sustained over time.

The Aawaz II programme addresses exclusion and vulnerability through an inclusion-centred community engagement model

operating across programme districts in Punjab and KP. Its platforms, including Village Forums (VFs), District Forums (DFs) and Aawaz Aagahi Centres (AACs), are designed to ensure meaningful participation of marginalised groups in community processes and to create conditions in which leadership can emerge through sustained interaction, practical problem-solving and collective engagement with institutions. The programme also recognises that leadership can be exercised through everyday action, mediation, referrals and community support, even in the absence of formal authority or institutional recognition.

This case study examines the pathways through which leadership roles are assumed, the enabling conditions and barriers that shape those pathways, the intersectional dimensions of leadership emergence and recognition and the sustainability of such roles beyond direct programme facilitation. It also explores how communities themselves define leadership, how trust and legitimacy are negotiated in practice and how different social groups experience opportunities and constraints in exercising influence within community settings.

1.1 Objectives, Approach and Methodology

Objectives

This case study aims to examine how Aawaz II's inclusive community engagement model enables individuals from marginalised groups to move from participation to influence and how leadership is exercised, recognised and sustained in practice at the community level, particularly in relation to problem-solving, collective action and engagement with institutions. The specific objectives are to:

- Examine how individuals from marginalised groups move from participation to influence within Aawaz II community spaces.
- Explore how communities understand, recognise and legitimise leadership in practice.

- Analyse how gender, disability, age, religion, socio-economic position and identity shape leadership opportunities, constraints and visibility.
- Examine the role of trust, peer networks and collective platforms in enabling or sustaining leadership.
- Assess the sustainability of community-based leadership beyond programme support.
- Generate broader learning on inclusive and community-recognised leadership to inform future programming and practice.

Approach and Methods

This case study adopts a qualitative and exploratory approach to examine how leadership is understood, exercised and sustained within Aawaz II communities, particularly among women, PWDs, transgender persons, religious minorities and marginalised youth. The study is informed by relational and practice-based understandings of leadership, which conceptualise leadership not as a fixed position or formal authority, but as a socially negotiated process exercised through influence, mobilisation, trust-building, collective problem-solving and engagement with institutions. An intersectional lens was also applied to examine how gender, disability, age, religion and socio-economic position shape leadership pathways, legitimacy and access to influence differently across groups.

The methodology combined a comprehensive desk review, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). The desk review included programme documents, annual reports, monitoring data and relevant literature related to inclusive participation, leadership and community engagement within the Aawaz II context.

Qualitative fieldwork was conducted across programme districts of Abbottabad, Malakand, Nowshera, Sheikhpura, Toba Tek Singh and Bahawalnagar. FGDs were conducted separately with women-only

groups and mixed groups to explore how leadership is recognised within communities, what qualities and actions are associated with leadership and how different groups experience trust, legitimacy and influence. KIs were conducted with Aawaz Change Agents (ACAs), community recognised leaders and AAC Resource Persons (RPs) to examine leadership journeys, institutional engagement, support systems, resistance and sustainability. Details of FGD and KI participants are provided in Annex 1.

The tools used in conducting FGDs and KIs were designed to trace leadership processes step-by-step, including how individuals became involved, what actions they took, how communities responded and what enabled or constrained leadership over time. Particular attention was given to how gender, disability, religion, age and social position shaped opportunities for participation, legitimacy and influence.

Qualitative data from FGDs and KIs was translated, coded and analysed thematically against the study objectives, research questions and analytical framework to identify recurring patterns, variations and differences across social groups shaping inclusive leadership pathways within Aawaz II communities.

1.2 Challenges and Limitations

This case study recognises limitations related to its qualitative design, geographic coverage and the socially sensitive nature of discussions concerning leadership, influence, legitimacy and exclusion, which are often shaped by prevailing norms and local power relations. Findings should be interpreted as indicative of patterns and processes rather than exhaustive or fully representative. As with all self-reported qualitative evidence, responses may reflect recall limitations, attribution challenges and social desirability bias, particularly where participants discussed issues related to status, recognition and unequal power relations within communities.

Group-based data collection methods may also have affected

participation, as existing dynamics linked to gender, age, status, disability, religion and social identity can influence who speaks and how openly. The presence of individuals in different hierarchical positions within the same FGD may affect the candour of responses, particularly from women, younger participants and members of vulnerable groups. To address these limitations, the study used composition-sensitive FGDs, employed trained facilitators and triangulated findings across multiple respondent groups and data sources. Where single accounts or perspectives are cited, they are noted as illustrative rather than representative, and broader patterns are drawn from convergent evidence across participants, contexts, districts and documentary sources.

1.3 Context and Problem Statement

Across many communities in Pakistan, leadership and influence are shaped by deeply embedded social hierarchies, gender norms and unequal access to authority. Formal decision-making spaces and community leadership are often dominated by individuals with greater social status, mobility, economic influence or institutional access, while women, PWDs, transgender persons, religious minorities and marginalised youth frequently face barriers to participation, visibility and recognition.¹ As a result, many individuals from marginalised groups contribute to community problem-solving, mediation and social support processes without being formally recognised as leaders. Perceptions of who is considered trustworthy, capable or legitimate are often influenced by gender, age, disability, religion, caste and socio-economic position, creating unequal opportunities for influence and recognition across social groups.

At the same time, many local challenges related to conflict, gender-based violence (GBV), child marriage, discrimination, exclusion and access to services are often addressed first through informal community processes rather than formal institutional mechanisms.

¹ Naila Kabeer, *Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought* (London: Verso, 1994); Srilatha Batliwala, "Taking the Power out of Empowerment - An Experiential Account," *Development in Practice* 17, no. 4-5 (2007): 557-565.

Individuals who mediate disputes, mobilise support, facilitate referrals or connect communities to services can, therefore, perform important leadership functions even without occupying formal positions. However, these informal pathways to influence remain relatively under-examined within both policy and programming discussions, particularly in relation to how leadership emerges, gains legitimacy and is sustained over time.

Pakistan's legal and policy frameworks increasingly recognise principles of inclusion, participation and protection for marginalised groups. Frameworks such as the National Gender Policy Framework (2022-2032), provincial laws addressing GBV and child protection, and disability inclusion policies, provide important formal commitments towards equitable participation and protection. However, implementation gaps, uneven institutional reach and entrenched social norms continue to limit meaningful participation and leadership opportunities for many marginalised groups, particularly at the community level. Formal representation alone has often proven insufficient to address the everyday social and relational barriers that influence whose voices are heard, trusted and acted upon within communities.

Although development programming frequently emphasises participation and representation, considerably less attention has been given to understanding how leadership develops through community engagement, problem-solving and collective action among individuals who may not hold formal authority or institutional positions. Evidence also remains limited on how different social groups experience leadership opportunities and constraints, how legitimacy is negotiated within unequal social environments and what factors sustain or weaken community recognised leadership over time.

2.Aawaz II Approach

2.1 Inclusion-Centred Community Engagement Model

Aawaz II is funded by the United Kingdom through the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and implemented by the British Council in partnership with national and provincial stakeholders across Punjab and KP. The programme seeks to address exclusion, vulnerability and unequal access to participation by strengthening community engagement, social cohesion and linkages between citizens and institutions, particularly for women, PWDs, transgender persons, religious minorities and other marginalised groups.

The programme adopts an inclusion-centred community engagement model that emphasises participation, collective dialogue and locally embedded problem-solving processes. Rather than relying solely on formal institutional mechanisms, the approach aims to strengthen community-level engagement and create spaces where marginalised individuals can participate more meaningfully in decisions, referrals, mediation processes and collective responses to local issues.

2.2 Community Forums and Participatory Platforms

At the community level, Aawaz II operates through a network of participatory forums and engagement platforms, including VFs, DFs, AACs and youth engagement initiatives such as Aawaz Change Agents (ACAs). These serve as spaces for dialogue, awareness raising, referrals, community mobilisation and engagement with institutions.

The programme places particular emphasis on ensuring

representation and participation of marginalised groups within these spaces. Through participation in forums, meetings, referrals and community activities, individuals from diverse social backgrounds are able to build relationships, strengthen confidence, increase visibility and engage more actively in community processes and institutional interactions.

2.3 Leadership through Participation and Collective Action

A central feature of the Aawaz II approach is that leadership is not treated primarily as a formal role or designated position. Instead, leadership often emerges through sustained participation, practical engagement and demonstrated action within community settings. Individuals increasingly become recognised as influential because they mediate disputes, facilitate referrals, mobilise others, accompany community members to services, support vulnerable individuals or help address local problems.

The programme's approach also recognises that leadership pathways are shaped by unequal social relations and intersecting identities. Gender, disability, age, religion and social status all influence who is able to participate, whose actions are considered legitimate and whose voices are recognised within community processes. As a result, leadership emergence remains uneven and negotiated rather than automatic.

Importantly, Aawaz II does not position leadership as a separate intervention area. Rather, leadership emerges as an outcome of broader inclusion, participation and engagement processes embedded within the programme's community architecture. Through participatory spaces, collective action and engagement with institutions, the programme creates conditions through which some individuals gradually transition from participation into broader forms of community influence and leadership.

3. Theoretical Framework

This case study is guided by a theoretical and analytical framework that conceptualises leadership as relational, socially negotiated and shaped by unequal social structures rather than as a fixed or purely institutional role. The framework draws on relational and practice-based understandings of leadership, theories of recognition and legitimacy, intersectionality and concepts of collective and adaptive agency to examine how individuals from marginalised groups move from participation to influence within community settings. Together, these perspectives provide a basis for analysing how leadership emerges, how it is recognised and sustained and how broader social norms, identities and power relations shape leadership pathways differently across groups. Further details on the theoretical foundations and analytical concepts informing the case study are provided in Annex 2.

3.1 Leadership as Relational and Practice-Based

This study approaches leadership as a relational and practice-based process exercised through influence, trust-building, mobilisation and collective problem-solving within everyday community settings. Rather than limiting leadership to formal authority or institutional designation, the study examines how individuals become influential through actions such as mediation, facilitation of referrals, mobilisation of support and engagement with local institutions.

Within this framing, leadership is understood as something exercised through relationships, participation and practical engagement rather than as a fixed attribute attached to position or status. This perspective is particularly relevant within socially constrained environments where marginalised individuals may lack formal

authority but nonetheless exercise meaningful influence within community processes.²

3.2 Recognition, Legitimacy and Belonging

The study also draws on concepts of recognition, legitimacy and belonging to examine how leadership becomes socially accepted, negotiated or resisted within communities. Leadership sustainability depends not only on participation or action, but also on whether individuals are recognised by others as legitimate actors capable of influencing decisions, resolving problems or representing community concerns.³

Recognition and legitimacy are shaped through everyday social interactions and community relationships, including perceptions of trustworthiness, accessibility, relatability and fairness. Prevailing social norms and unequal power relations often influence whose voices are considered credible or authoritative within community spaces. As a result, individuals from marginalised groups may face additional barriers to being recognised as legitimate leaders even when they actively contribute to problem-solving and collective action.⁴

3.3 Intersectionality and Unequal Leadership Pathways

An intersectional lens further informs the analysis by recognising that leadership pathways are shaped by overlapping systems of inequality and exclusion. Gender, disability, age, religion and social position interact to create differentiated opportunities, risks and constraints for individuals attempting to take on visible or influential roles within communities.⁵

² Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow and Marty Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009); Institute of Development Studies, *Inclusive Leadership and Power* (Brighton: IDS, 2018).

³ Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking Recognition," *New Left Review* 3 (2000): 107-120.

⁴ Nira Yuval-Davis, *The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations* (London: Sage, 2011).

⁵ Naila Kabeer, "Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment," *Development and Change* 36, no. 2 (2005): 199-226.

The study recognises that marginalised groups are not homogeneous and that leadership experiences differ significantly across contexts and identities. Women, PWDs, transgender persons, religious minorities and marginalised youth may each experience different forms of resistance, exclusion or limited mobility that affect their visibility, legitimacy and access to influence. Intersectionality, therefore, provides an analytical lens for examining how multiple identities simultaneously shape leadership opportunities and constraints.

3.4 Inclusive, Collective and Adaptive Leadership

The framework additionally draws on concepts of inclusive and adaptive leadership to understand how leadership is enabled through participation, collective engagement, networks and community support systems rather than through individual authority alone. Leadership pathways are often strengthened through mentoring, peer support, collective platforms and opportunities for sustained community engagement.⁶

Within the Aawaz II context, leadership is, therefore, understood as embedded within broader social relationships and community processes rather than as isolated individual achievement. Community forums, participatory platforms and support networks can create enabling conditions through which marginalised individuals strengthen confidence, gain legitimacy, navigate resistance and gradually assume more active and influential roles over time.

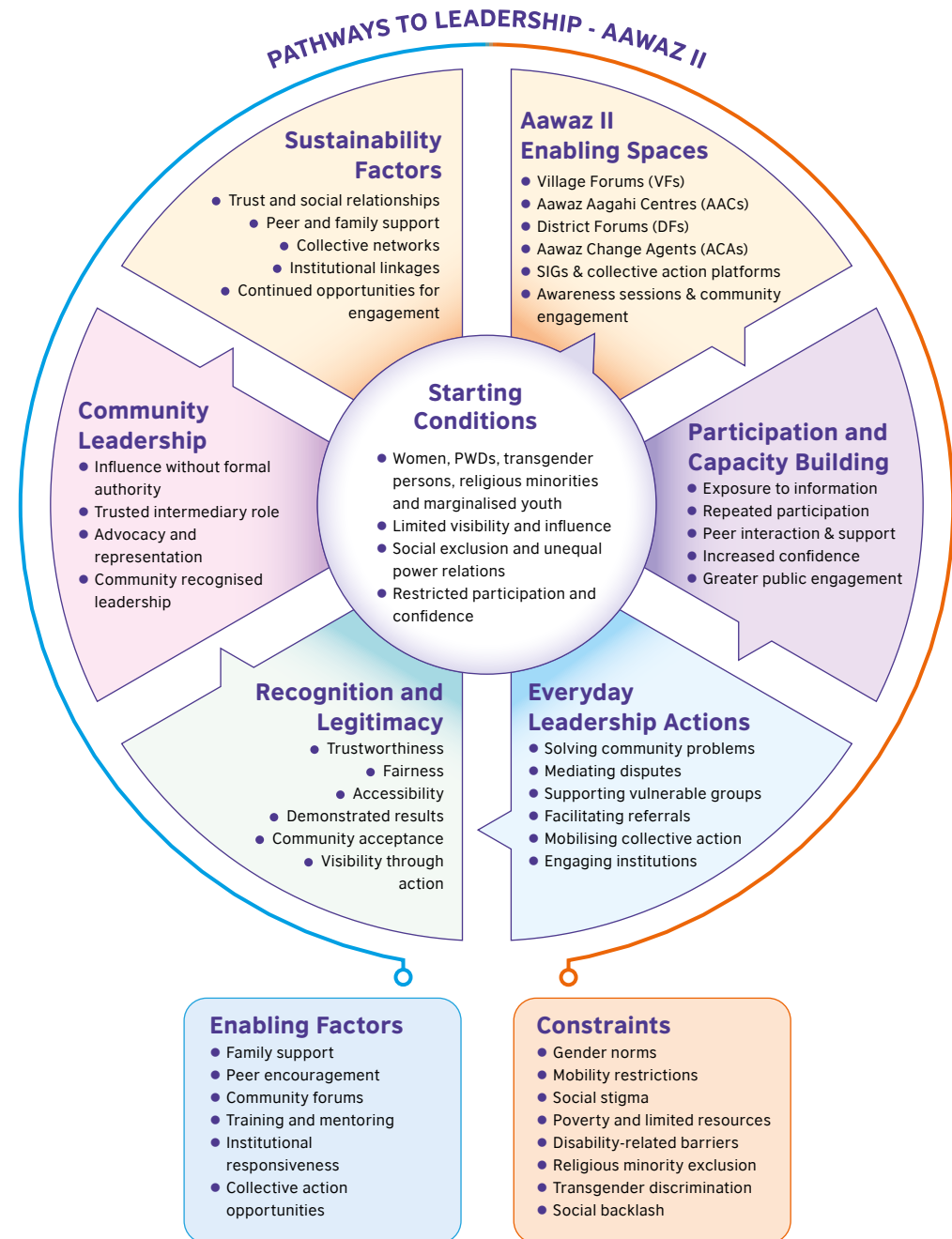
The study examines not only individual leadership experiences, but also the collective relationships, participatory structures and enabling conditions that support or constrain leadership emergence and sustainability.

⁶ Clare Castillejo, *Promoting Women's Leadership in Fragile States* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2011); Tam O'Neil and Pilar Domingo, *Women's Leadership and Political Participation: Review of the Evidence on Barriers, Enablers and Strategies* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2016).

4. Key Findings

This section presents the key findings emerging from FGDs and KIs conducted across selected Aawaz II communities. The findings examine how leadership is understood, exercised and sustained within everyday community settings, particularly among women, PWDs, transgender persons, religious minorities and marginalised youth. Consistent with the study's theoretical and analytical framework, the analysis approaches leadership as a relational and socially negotiated process shaped by trust, participation, legitimacy, collective action and unequal social structures rather than by formal authority alone.

As a whole, the findings demonstrate that leadership pathways are neither uniform nor equally accessible across social groups. While community influence often emerged through participation, problem-solving and engagement with others, opportunities for recognition and sustained leadership were shaped by intersecting identities, social norms and unequal access to resources, legitimacy and institutional support.



4.1 Emergence of Leadership through Everyday Action and Problem-Solving

Across study districts and participant groups, leadership was consistently understood not as a formal title or institutional position, but as the ability to support others, solve problems, mediate disputes and mobilise collective action within everyday community settings. Participants described influential individuals as those who ‘stood with people,’ listened fairly, intervened during crises and helped others navigate institutions or social problems, regardless of whether they held any formal position of authority.

These understandings align strongly with the study’s relational and practice-based conceptualisation of leadership, in which influence is exercised through trust, engagement and practical action rather than through official designation or status. Across districts, leadership legitimacy was associated less with formal authority and more with perceptions of honesty, accessibility, fairness and sustained support during difficult situations.



In Toba Tek Singh, FGD participants described leadership as emerging through practical community engagement: “A person who solves people’s problems, helps them, guides them and stands with them. Even if they do not have any position, people still follow them because of their actions.”

- Participant, Women’s FGD, Toba Tek Singh.



Older women, socially active individuals, respected neighbours and teachers were repeatedly identified as influential actors within community problem-solving processes.

In the mixed FGD from Toba Tek Singh, participants similarly associated trust and legitimacy with behaviour and demonstrated action rather than formal position: “If someone stands with people in difficult times, speaks honestly and does not discriminate, then people trust them.” - Male, Christian, Toba Tek Singh.

Comparable views emerged in Bahawalnagar, where participants distinguished leadership from formal office and associated influence with fairness, service and practical problem-solving. One participant observed that even an ordinary person could become influential when decisions were made impartially and disputes were resolved fairly, while another explained that helping families reconcile and preserving households was regarded as a form of social responsibility rather than a formal duty.

Participants also described leadership as situational and issue-based rather than fixed. Individuals often became influential during disputes, domestic violence cases, child marriage interventions, access-to-service issues or emergencies where practical action was needed. In several examples, people who were previously viewed as ‘ordinary community members’ became recognised as leaders after taking initiative during a specific crisis or social issue.

Programme documentation similarly illustrates how women leaders, ACAs, VF members and community volunteers played active roles in referrals, collective action, conflict pre-emption, citizen-state engagement and advocacy around GBV, child marriage, social exclusion and intolerance. These examples suggest that leadership within Aawaz II was enabled primarily through participation and practical engagement rather than through pre-determined authority structures.⁷

These findings reinforce the study’s theoretical framing by demonstrating that leadership functioned less as a static identity and more as a socially negotiated and action-oriented process embedded within everyday community relationships.

⁷ British Council, Aawaz II Annual Progress Report July 2024 - March 2025, 2-4.

4.2 Participation and Collective Spaces Enabled Pathways from Silence to Influence

A recurring finding across districts was that participatory spaces created through Aawaz II enabled individuals from different social groups to gradually move from limited participation towards greater visibility, confidence and influence within their communities. Leadership rarely emerged suddenly. Rather, influence developed incrementally through repeated participation, exposure to information, peer interaction and opportunities for collective engagement.

These pathways, however, were experienced differently across groups. Women frequently associated leadership with gaining the confidence to speak publicly and support others. Young people often framed leadership in terms of awareness raising and social change, while PWDs described leadership as overcoming social assumptions regarding capability and demonstrating that disability did not preclude participation or influence. These findings align closely with empowerment-oriented understandings of leadership and collective agency, which conceptualise leadership as a gradual and relational process rather than a fixed attribute or position.

Participants across districts described how community forums created spaces where individuals who previously hesitated to participate gradually became more confident and visible within community discussions and activities. In Bahawalnagar, one participant explained: “Earlier, women mostly stayed within their homes and avoided speaking publicly. Gradually, after attending meetings and sessions, they started discussing issues openly and helping other women as well.” - Female, FGD Participant, Bahawalnagar.

The experience of a female ACA and person with disability in Bahawalnagar further illustrated how participation could evolve into recognised influence. Initially lacking confidence and uncertain about engaging with others, she described how training, teamwork and support from RPs gradually enabled her to speak publicly and address sensitive issues. Over time, community members began

approaching her directly regarding cases of child marriage and domestic violence, reflecting a transition from awareness raising to trusted community engagement and referral support.



In Nowshera, participants noted that regular interaction through community meetings helped women become more comfortable engaging with institutions and public processes: *“When women repeatedly attend meetings and hear others speak, they also slowly gain confidence. Earlier, many women would not even visit offices or talk about community issues.”*

- Female, FGD Participant, Nowshera.



Comparable transitions were evident elsewhere as well. In Toba Tek Singh, exposure to awareness activities and collective spaces encouraged greater participation and confidence among younger women: “Girls are now studying, moving forward and speaking more confidently. These awareness sessions and meetings encouraged people and gave them confidence.” - Community-based Leader, Female, Toba Tek Singh.

Programme documentation similarly indicates that Aawaz II deliberately invested in community forums, VF networks, women community networks, ACAs, Special Interest Groups (SIGs) and collective action initiatives to deepen participation and behaviour change. These platforms created opportunities for excluded groups to raise concerns publicly, interact with institutions, advocate for services and engage more actively in community decision-making processes.⁸

⁸ British Council, Aawaz II Annual Progress Report July 2024 - March 2025, 2-3; Aawaz II, Programme Overview (Islamabad: British Council, n.d.).

The findings suggest that participatory and collective spaces functioned not only as sites of awareness raising, but also as enabling environments through which confidence, legitimacy and community-recognised leadership gradually developed over time. Consistent with the study's theoretical framework, these findings demonstrate that leadership pathways were iterative and socially embedded, emerging through repeated interaction, exposure and practice rather than through formal designation or predetermined authority.

4.3 Leadership Legitimacy is Shaped by Gender, Identity and Social Position

Although participatory spaces enabled broader engagement and influence, recognition and legitimacy remained uneven across social groups. Gender, age, disability, religion, economic position and transgender identity continued to shape whose voices were accepted, whose actions were considered legitimate and who faced greater resistance when attempting to take on visible community roles.

Female participants repeatedly described how men were more easily recognised as leaders, while women's contributions often remained less visible despite substantial involvement in family mediation, social support and community problem-solving.



In Toba Tek Singh, one participant explained: *"Many women solve issues within families or support others, but nobody calls them leaders. Their work remains largely inside the home or neighbourhood."*

- Female, FGD Participant, Toba Tek Singh.



Women frequently faced criticism for speaking publicly, intervening in disputes or engaging outside the home. Concerns related to family honour, mobility restrictions and social expectations were identified as barriers limiting women's visibility and sustained participation. Similar concerns emerged in Malakand, where women's participation in public spaces continued to be shaped by community perceptions and family approval: "Women can move forward, but only when families support them. Otherwise, many hesitate because people talk about them in a negative manner." - Female, FGD Participant, Malakand.

Participants also observed that education, economic resources and social connections frequently enhanced legitimacy and visibility within communities. In the mixed FGD from Toba Tek Singh, participants reflected that women, poorer individuals and minority communities often remained less visible even when they actively supported others: "Men get recognised more easily. Educated people too. Women, poor people or people from minority communities often remain less visible even if they help others." - Female, FGD Participant, Toba Tek Singh.

Similar dynamics emerged in Bahawalnagar where individuals from influential families and stronger economic backgrounds were often viewed as more credible and authoritative. Those with fewer resources or weaker social connections frequently had to demonstrate their commitment over longer periods before receiving comparable recognition.

Transgender participants described even greater barriers related to stigma, exclusion and limited social acceptance, with transgender persons often hesitating to participate publicly because of fear of ridicule or discrimination, despite gradual improvements in awareness and interaction. In Nowshera, one participant explained: "For transgender persons, speaking publicly or taking leadership roles is still very difficult because society does not easily accept them." - Male, FGD Participant, Nowshera.

Insights shared by a transgender Muslim participant from Toba Tek

Singh further demonstrated how family support and community acceptance influenced leadership opportunities. The participant explained that younger transgender persons often faced rejection within families and communities, making it difficult to develop confidence and participate publicly. Conversely, supportive relationships and continued engagement with institutions enabled transgender persons to remain visible and advocate for community concerns.

These findings suggest that leadership within Aawaz II communities was not shaped solely by individual confidence or participation, but also by broader social negotiations around legitimacy, identity, visibility and acceptance within unequal community environments. Leadership opportunities and recognition were, therefore, mediated by the interaction of multiple social identities and structural inequalities, resulting in distinct pathways and constraints across different groups rather than following a uniform process of leadership emergence.

4.4 Leadership is Sustained through Trust, Networks and Institutional Linkages

Leadership sustainability depended not only on individual commitment, but also on relationships of trust, collective support and connections with institutions. Individuals who remained active over time were often those who had built strong social relationships within communities, received support from peers or families and demonstrated practical outcomes through their engagement.

Across districts, people continued trusting and supporting individuals who consistently remained accessible, treated others fairly and demonstrated commitment to community wellbeing. In Bahawalnagar, one participant explained: “People listen to those who help others without discrimination and remain available in difficult times. Trust develops slowly through behaviour.” - Female, FGD Participant, Bahawalnagar.

Similarly, in Nowshera, sustained engagement and community relationships strengthened individuals’ influence over time: “If someone keeps supporting people and remains connected with the community, then people gradually start respecting and trusting them more.” - Male, FGD Participant, Nowshera.

Peer support and collective backing also played an important role in sustaining visible community roles, particularly for women and members of other marginalised groups. Encouragement from families, peers and community networks enabled individuals to continue engaging despite criticism or social resistance.



In Malakand, one participant reflected: “*When community members stand together and encourage each other, then people gain confidence to continue their work.*”

- Female, FGD Participant, Malakand.



Institutional linkages emerged as another important enabling factor. Across districts, participants described how active community members increasingly acted as intermediaries connecting individuals to hospitals, offices of the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA), police stations, Social Welfare Departments and other institutional actors. Such engagement often strengthened both community trust and the legitimacy of local leaders, with visible outcomes, including access to documentation, referrals and service coordination, increasing confidence in both community actors and collective forums.

Successful engagement with institutions enhanced the credibility of local leaders. Community members who facilitated access to services, accompanied vulnerable individuals to government offices or helped resolve administrative challenges were increasingly viewed as

trusted intermediaries capable of delivering tangible results for their communities. Engagement with institutions also increased confidence among marginalised groups by making services appear more accessible and responsive. In several districts, female participants highlighted that accompaniment and referral support from trusted community actors made it easier for vulnerable individuals to approach institutions they had previously avoided.

At the same time, leadership gains remained fragile. Financial pressures, household responsibilities, social backlash, criticism and the absence of regular forums and opportunities for engagement were identified as factors that could weaken or reverse leadership pathways over time.



The continuity of collective spaces remained important for sustaining participation and confidence among women and marginalised groups in particular: *“If meetings and activities stop completely, then many people may again become disconnected and hesitant to participate.”*

- Female, FGD Participant, Abbottabad.



These findings demonstrate that leadership within Aawaz II communities was sustained not simply through individual agency, but through continued access to collective spaces, peer support, institutional linkages and socially recognised networks of trust and legitimacy. Consistent with the study's theoretical framework, leadership emerged as a collective and relational process whose sustainability depended upon supportive environments and continued opportunities for engagement rather than upon individual effort alone.



5. Recommendations

Findings from the study indicate that while Aawaz II has enabled important pathways for community recognised leadership to emerge among women, PWDs, transgender persons, religious minorities and marginalised youth, these gains remain uneven and vulnerable to reversal without continued institutional, social and community-level reinforcement. The recommendations provided in this section build on strengths and constraints identified through the findings and propose practical measures for strengthening inclusive and community-based leadership within existing systems and structures.

A. Government Actors

1. Strengthen institutional engagement with community-based and informal leaders.

District administrations, Social Welfare, Local Government (LG) and Women Development Departments, and Child Protection Units (CPUs) should strengthen regular engagement with community-based actors, including women leaders, youth volunteers, transgender community representatives and other locally trusted individuals who already perform referral, mediation and support functions within communities.

This engagement should be integrated into existing outreach, facilitation, safeguarding, referral and citizen engagement mechanisms.

District administrations should strengthen local referral coordination and community-facing engagement processes that improve access to services for marginalised groups.

2. Expand accessible community-level engagement spaces.

District administrations, LG, Youth Affairs, Women Development and Social Welfare Departments should strengthen safe, accessible and locally embedded community engagement spaces that enable sustained participation in dialogue, problem-solving and local decision-making.

Differentiated approaches should be adopted to address barriers related to mobility, stigma, accessibility, institutional mistrust and restrictive social norms. For women, this may include flexible timings, family engagement and safe spaces for participation. For PWDs, accessibility and reasonable accommodation should be prioritised. For transgender persons and religious minorities, efforts should focus on strengthening safety, dignity and meaningful representation within community engagement processes.

3. Integrate inclusion and community engagement approaches within routine frontline training systems.

LG, Social Welfare and Women Development Departments, police training schools and other frontline institutions should integrate practical modules on inclusion, community engagement, referral sensitivity and engagement with marginalised populations into existing training systems.

This should include sensitisation around gender norms, disability inclusion, transgender inclusion, minority rights and respectful engagement with vulnerable and marginalised communities.

4. Strengthen continuity between community engagement processes and institutional response systems.

District administrations, Social Welfare and Women Development Departments, NADRA facilitation centres, CPUs and related service-

delivery institutions should strengthen coordination pathways between community platforms and institutional actors to improve referrals, follow-up and responsiveness.

B. Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and Development Partners

5. Continue investing in participatory and collective spaces.

CSOs and development partners should continue supporting long-term participatory platforms that create opportunities for confidence-building, dialogue, mentoring and collective action among marginalised groups.

6. Move beyond representation towards leadership pathways.

Programming should move beyond numerical participation targets and support progressive leadership pathways that combine mentoring, practical action, referrals, institutional engagement and opportunities for community mobilisation. Particular attention should be given to individuals who face greater social risks when taking on visible roles.

7. Strengthen peer networks, mentoring and collective support systems.

CSOs should strengthen mentoring relationships, peer learning opportunities and support networks that reduce isolation and help emerging leaders navigate backlash and social pressure. This is particularly important for individuals from highly marginalised groups whose leadership legitimacy may remain socially contested. Cross-community exchanges and intergenerational learning opportunities should also be encouraged to broaden leadership opportunities and

strengthen solidarity across groups.⁹

8. Preserve flexible and inclusion-centred engagement approaches.

Programmes should remain attentive to unequal power dynamics and encourage broader participation and leadership opportunities to avoid concentration of influence among a limited number of actors.

9. Strengthen pathways from participation to institutional engagement.

Future programming should continue supporting referrals, institutional linkages and structured opportunities for engagement with public institutions so that participation can translate into sustained influence and leadership. Attention should be given to ensuring that these pathways remain accessible to individuals with limited mobility, weaker social networks, lower literacy levels and those facing stigma or discrimination because of gender identity, disability, religion or economic vulnerability.

10. Generate further evidence on community recognised leadership.

Future programming and research should continue examining how legitimacy is negotiated, how leadership becomes socially accepted and how leadership pathways differ across gender, disability, religion, age and socio-economic position.

⁹ Jo Rowlands, *Questioning Empowerment: Working with Women in Honduras* (Oxford: Oxfam, 1997); Srilatha Batliwala, "Taking the Power out of Empowerment - An Experiential Account," *Development in Practice* 17, no. 4-5 (2007): 557-565.



Conclusion

This case study demonstrates that leadership within Aawaz II communities often emerged not through formal authority or institutional designation, but through everyday action, trust-building, collective engagement and practical problem-solving within community settings. Across districts, participants consistently associated leadership with individuals who supported others, facilitated referrals, mobilised communities and remained accessible during moments of need. Leadership was, therefore, understood less as a fixed position and more as a socially negotiated and relational process embedded within everyday community life.

The findings further demonstrate that participatory and inclusive community spaces enabled many women, PWDs, transgender persons, religious minorities and marginalised youth to move gradually from passive participation to more visible and influential community roles. However, leadership pathways were neither uniform nor equally accessible. Opportunities for recognition and legitimacy continued to be shaped by intersecting inequalities related to gender, disability, religion, age, socio-economic position and institutional access, resulting in distinct experiences, opportunities and constraints across different social groups. For many marginalised individuals, leadership remained dependent not only on individual confidence and commitment, but also on peer support, community acceptance and broader institutional responsiveness.

Overall, the study suggests that inclusive and community recognised leadership can emerge meaningfully within socially constrained environments when participation is accompanied by trust, collective support and opportunities for engagement with institutions. Leadership emerged as a relational and socially negotiated process whose sustainability depended upon enabling environments, supportive networks and continued opportunities for participation and action. These findings highlight the importance of flexible, locally embedded and inclusion-centred approaches that strengthen not only participation, but also the social and institutional conditions necessary for leadership to emerge, gain legitimacy and be sustained over time.

Annex 1. Participant Details of FGDs and KIIs

Table 1. Participants by gender, religion and vulnerability

Total Participants	60
Male	11
Female	46
Transgender	3
PWDs	6
Muslims	50
Non-Muslims	10

Table 2. Participants by Category

Aawaz II Volunteers	
Category	Count
VF members	16
RPs	5
EWS-ERM	2
Focal Persons	2
ACAs	11

Annex 2. Detailed Theoretical and Analytical Framework

This case study is informed by scholarship on inclusive leadership, adaptive leadership, recognition and legitimacy, social capital and intersectionality. Together, these perspectives provide a framework for understanding how leadership emerges, gains legitimacy and is sustained within socially unequal and exclusionary environments.

A. Inclusive Leadership in Exclusionary Contexts

Research increasingly recognises that leadership in fragile and exclusionary settings is shaped less by formal authority and more by processes of influence, legitimacy and collective problem-solving. For women, PWDs, transgender persons, religious minorities and marginalised youth, leadership rarely follows linear or institutionalised pathways. Instead, it often emerges through informal roles, community mediation, advocacy and negotiated spaces of participation.¹⁰

Development scholarship further argues that inclusive leadership is not simply about increasing representation but about whose voices, experiences and priorities are recognised as legitimate within public and community decision-making processes.¹¹ This perspective is particularly relevant in contexts where authority remains concentrated among individuals with greater social status, mobility, resources or institutional access.

B. Leadership as a Relational and Adaptive Process

This case study adopts a relational and practice-based understanding of leadership, drawing particularly on adaptive leadership theory. Heifetz and colleagues conceptualise leadership as the practice of mobilising people to address complex challenges and adapt to

¹⁰ Clare Castillejo, Promoting Women's Leadership in Fragile States; Tam O'Neil and Pilar Domingo, Women's Leadership and Political Participation.

¹¹ Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking Recognition," New Left Review 3 (2000): 107-120.

changing circumstances rather than as a formal position or title.¹²

From this perspective, leadership is exercised whenever individuals or groups mobilise others, facilitate problem-solving, negotiate norms or enable collective action, regardless of whether they hold formal authority. Leadership is, therefore, understood as something people do rather than something they possess.

Community leadership literature similarly highlights that influential actors often serve as intermediaries between communities and institutions, translating everyday concerns into collective claims and navigating power asymmetries through relationships of trust.¹³

Importantly, leadership is recognised as episodic and issue-specific. Individuals may exercise leadership in relation to particular issues or moments without necessarily being regarded as leaders across all domains or over time.

C. Recognition, Legitimacy and Everyday Power

Theories of recognition and social justice provide an important lens for understanding why leadership among marginalised groups is not only about opportunity but also about legitimacy. Fraser argues that meaningful participation requires both redistribution of resources and recognition of social status. Without recognition, participation often remains conditional and unequal.¹⁴

Leadership legitimacy is, therefore, negotiated through everyday interactions and relationships. Questions of who is trusted, whose voice is listened to and whose authority is accepted become central to understanding how influence is exercised.

In contexts characterised by low trust or weak institutional responsiveness, networks of reciprocity, reputation and social relationships often become critical sources of legitimacy and influence. Putnam's work on social capital highlights how trust-based

¹² Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow and Marty Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009).

¹³ Naila Kabeer, "Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment," *Development and Change* 36, no. 2 (2005): 199-226.

¹⁴ Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking Recognition," *New Left Review* 3 (2000): 107-120.

networks and collective relationships facilitate cooperation and strengthen the capacity for collective action.¹⁵

These perspectives are particularly relevant for understanding how community-based leaders sustain influence and navigate resistance over time.

D. Intersectionality and Differential Leadership Pathways

This case study adopts an intersectional perspective to understand how leadership opportunities and constraints differ across groups. Intersectional scholarship demonstrates that experiences of leadership are shaped by overlapping forms of inequality linked to gender, disability, religion, age, class and identity.¹⁶

As a result, leadership is not experienced uniformly across marginalised groups. Women leaders may confront restrictions related to mobility and social norms. PWDs may face assumptions regarding capability and dependence. Transgender persons may experience heightened stigma and safety concerns. Religious minority leaders may navigate questions of belonging and acceptance.

An intersectional lens enables analysis to move beyond treating marginalised communities as a single category and instead examines how different configurations of power and exclusion shape opportunities, legitimacy and the costs associated with leadership.

E. Collective and Adaptive Agency

The case study also recognises that leadership is rarely an individual phenomenon. Leadership pathways are shaped by collective relationships, mentoring, peer support and enabling environments. Networks, forums and collective spaces create opportunities for individuals to gain confidence, navigate resistance and sustain engagement over time.

¹⁵ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

¹⁶ Nira Yuval-Davis, *The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations* (London: Sage, 2011).

This perspective aligns with broader understandings of empowerment and collective agency, which emphasise that change emerges through social relationships and supportive environments rather than through individual capacity alone.¹⁷ From this perspective, leadership is viewed not as an isolated individual achievement, but as something embedded within wider networks of trust, solidarity and institutional engagement.

F. Analytical Framework

Drawing on these strands of literature, the analysis in this case study is organised around four inter-related concepts:

- (i) **Leadership as Relational Practice:** Leadership is understood as a process of influence, mobilisation and problem-solving rather than a formal role or position.
- (ii) **Recognition and Legitimacy:** Leadership sustainability depends on trust, social acceptance and everyday legitimacy within communities rather than formal authority alone.
- (iii) **Intersectionality:** Leadership pathways are shaped by overlapping identities and inequalities that produce differentiated opportunities, constraints and risks.
- (iv) **Collective and Adaptive Agency:** Leadership is exercised through peer support, mentoring, collective spaces and institutional relationships that enable individuals to navigate resistance and sustain influence over time.

Together, these concepts provide a framework for analysing how leadership emerges, is recognised and is sustained within Aawaz II communities, while linking community experiences to wider debates on inclusive governance, social cohesion and community-led development.

¹⁷ Naila Kabeer, "Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment," *Development and Change* 36, no. 2 (2005): 199-226.

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