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Transforming Social Norms to Prevent Child Marriage and GBV

Evidence-Based Models of Behaviour Change

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Disclaimer

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Acronyms

AAC	Aawaz Aagahi Centres
ACA	Aawaz Change Agent
BCC	Behaviour Change Communication
BISP	Benazir Income Support Programme
CDD	Community Development Department
CPU	Child Protection Units
DCC	District Coordination Committee
DF	District Forum
ERM	Early Response Mechanism
EWS	Early Warning System
GBV	Gender-based Violence
KP	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
KPCSW	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Commission on the Status of Women
LG&CDD	Local Government and Community Development Department
MEL	Monitoring and Learning
NADRA	National Database and Registration Authority
NC	Neighbourhood Council
NCSW	National Commission on the Status of Women
PCSW	Punjab Commission on the Status of Women
PWD	Persons With Disabilities
P&D	Planning and Development Department
SAP	Social Action Plan
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SROI	Social Return on Investment
SSDO	Sustainable Social Development Organisation
UC	Union Council
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
VC	Village Council
WHO	World Health Organisation

Transforming Social Norms to Prevent Child Marriage and GBV:

Converting Challenge into Opportunity

Highlights

Sustaining the Momentum of Change

Aawaz II comprehensive behavioural change model is a community-led, low-cost, scalable, intervention, that bridges the critical gap between policy and results, between reactive and prevention. The government can integrate the Aawaz II approach at nominal cost, leveraging thousands of trained volunteers, including youth, to:

- **Extend reach** and support cost-effective prevention by identifying risks and cases early, reducing the caseload on overburdened state services
- **Shift norms**: Operationalise the "behaviour change" addressing the root causes of GBV, child marriage, intolerance and exclusion.

The High Cost of Inaction

Walking away is not free. It incurs massive hidden costs to the economy:

- **$800 million Annual GDP loss:** Child marriage costs Pakistan's economy $0.8 billion in a single year due to lost labour force participation and earnings[1].
- **80 million lost workdays:** Annual productivity loss of 80 million workdays due to absenteeism and trauma due to violence against women in Pakistan
- **System Strain:** Every prevented case saves the state roughly $177 – $354 in immediate police, legal, and shelter costs.

1 Gender Strategy- UNICEF Pakistan (2024-27). Available at https://www.unicef.org/pakistan/media/5766/file/UNICEFPakistanGenderStrategyRevisedv4.1.pdf

The Social Return on Investment (SROI)

A **4.5 to 7:1 Return on Investment**, if nominal coordination costs are absorbed i.e. for every $1 spent on integrating the Aawaz II community model, the economy benefits by up to $7 in the future – by reducing the burden on the justice system, healthcare, and social safety nets, and by enhancing benefits, such as increasing income and improving social cohesion[2].

Policy Recommendations - Three strategic priorities:



Scaling Up Proven Models instead of building from scratch



Building Public Sector Capacity for proactive response



Combining and Optimising Resources to ensure efficiency

2 Aawaz II Value For Money Study . British Council, 2025.

1. Background

The Government of Pakistan, both at the federal and provincial levels, has shown a strong commitment to end child marriage and gender-based violence (GBV) through laws, policies, and protection systems. Yet evidence confirms that such practices remain prevalent. According to the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme, Pakistan has the 6th highest number of child brides globally, with 54% of girls getting pregnant before their 18th birthday[3]. The situation regarding violence is equally alarming. Official data from the Law and Justice Commission of Pakistan (LJCP) reveals that 48,395 new gender-based violence cases were instituted in courts in 2023 alone [4]. This highlights a critical gap: legislation alone cannot shift the entrenched social norms that drive these behaviours[5].

The Aawaz II programme was designed to address such specific gaps. It has demonstrated that community-led mobilisation, focused directly on behaviour change and citizen-state engagement, is effective in preventing these harmful practices by shifting those very norms that support them.

Given this context, this brief addresses a core policy question: **How can the government transform proven, on-the-ground successes into lasting public actions that deliver long-term social and economic benefits?**

3 Gender Strategy- UNICEF Pakistan (2024-27). Available at https://www.unicef.org/pakistan/media/5766/file/UNICEFPakistanGenderStrategyRevisedv4.1.pdf

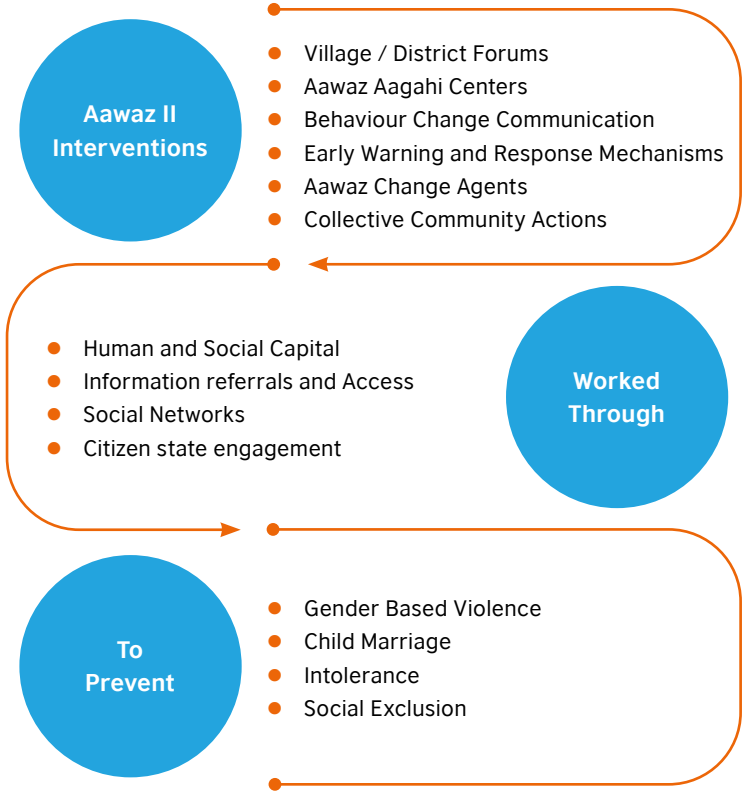
4 An Overview of Gender-Based Violence Cases – 2023. Law and Justice Commission of Pakistan. Islamabad LJCP 2024.

5 *Aawaz II Baseline Knowledge, Attitude and Practices (KAP) Survey.* British Council, 2024. As per the Survey 85% respondents believed that child marriage is justified, and 55% responded justified wife-beating in at least one circumstance. These Findings are also complemented by a recent study of UNFPA titled, "Drought and Deluge, The Silent Sufferings of Women and Girls in Climate Change".

2. The Aawaz II Model of Change

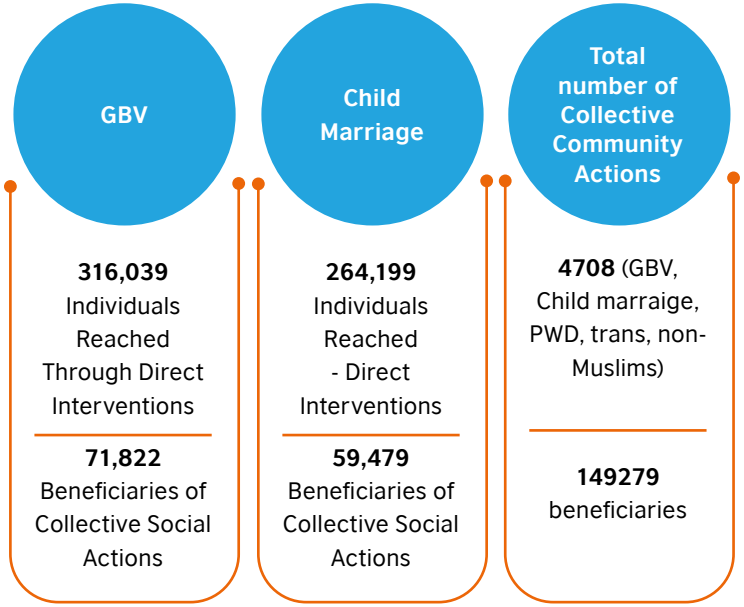
The programme's approach rests on a simple but powerful premise: lasting change requires citizens and the state to act together, citizens promoting new norms, and the state reinforcing and institutionalising them. The Aawaz II comprehensive behavioural change model is community-led, low-cost, scalable, and aligned with the government's own policies related to child protection and GBV. Figure 1 summarises the Aawaz II model.

Figure 1: Aawaz II Model of Change



Programme monitoring shows measurable social and behavioural change as documented in Aawaz II, and is presented in Figure 2 below:

Figure 2: Aawaz II Impact



Such reach and outcomes position Aawaz II among the most extensive sub-national social norm programmes in Pakistan[6].

6 The figures are based on results from June 2020 to June 2025

3. Sustaining the Momentum: Why Government Ownership Matters

The Governments of Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have established the necessary 'hard' infrastructure for protection, including Dar-ul-Amans, Child Protection Units (CPUs), and Helplines (1043, and1737 in Punjab; Bolo Helpline in KP). However, these departments face two critical challenges that limit their effectiveness:

i. **The Operational Gap (Reach):** State mechanisms are largely reactive and centralised at the district level, leading to a 'last-mile' limitation in service delivery, meaning that while services exist at the district level, they fail to reach the specific households in communities where violations occur.

ii. **The Methodological Gap (Norms):** Government departments are designed for enforcement, not prevention. While the state can arrest offenders, it currently lacks community-embedded tools to change the underlying social norms that drive child marriage and violence in the first place.

Aawaz II solves both challenges. By integrating this model, the government acquires a preventive 'soft' infrastructure in the form of thousands of trained volunteers, including youth change agents who act as the state's partners on the ground. This partnership enables departments to:

- **Extend Reach:** Complement essential crisis management with cost-effective prevention by identifying cases early. This will lead to reducing the caseload on overburdened state services by identifying the risks early.
- **Shift Norms:** Operationalise the 'Behaviour Change' component of their mandate, addressing the root causes of non-compliance that legislation alone cannot fix.

This transition is not about sustaining a project model; it is the most efficient pathway for the government to fulfil its constitutional obligations (Article 25) and SDG 5 commitments.

3.1. Progress

The institutionalisation of Aawaz II is already happening organically, demonstrating the model's alignment with government functions. These early successes provide a clear and low-risk pathway for formal government ownership.

1. **Integration into Government Committees:** Active Aawaz II forum and community members have been notified as members of relevant government committees and are frequently invited to government-led meetings on child protection, GBV, PWDs, etc. by the Social Welfare, Women Protection, and Women Development departments and the provincial Commissions on Status of Women.
2. **Coordination with Government Departments:** The programme has cultivated strong, functional partnerships with key government departments, including Child Protection Units (CPUs), police (via the Meesaq and Tahaffuz Centers in Punjab), NADRA, SWD, Ministries of Human Rights, Child Rights and Minority Affairs, Punjab Women Protection Authority, PCSW, KPCSW, WDD, SWD, Auqaf etc.
3. **Alignment with Provincial Policy Frameworks:** Aawaz II work directly supports and accelerates the government's own policy objectives. For example, the programme's efforts contributed to the passage of the Punjab Hindu Marriage Rules (2024).

Building on this foundation, the following section introduces the Aawaz II model, a community-driven approach that operationalises these principles and demonstrates how youth can become catalysts for social change at scale.

3.2 The Choice Ahead: Lasting Impact or Lost Opportunity?

The World Development Report (2017), the World Happiness Report (2023), and many other reports and research articles emphasise that

effective, trusted institutions are central to citizens' well-being, which lies at the heart of state responsibility[7]. This reinforces the case for integration, not just as a social good, but also as a fiscally sound investment, as it offers a win–win situation for the government, development partners, and society. Table 1 presents what can be achieved with government integration and what can be lost without it, along with cost implications.

Table 1: The Strategic Implications of Integration

Aspect	With Govt Ownership	Without Govt Ownership	Cost Implications
Fiscal Impact	**Lower future burden via prevention.** The cost to sustain (e.g., training, coordination) is a small, predictable investment.	**Higher long-term costs of crisis management.** The state continues to pay the high, reactive costs of GBV and child marriage (e.g., policing, emergency shelters, healthcare, welfare dependency).	GBV and child marriage impose $0.8B annual GDP loss and 80 million lost workdays, whereas prevention and awareness cost a fraction (details given in Section 7.0).
State Capacity (Defined as the organisational ability of the state to effectively connect with and serve its citizens)[8]	**Leapfrog from reactive to proactive.** The cost is minimal: training existing staff. The benefit is a massive, free asset: a trained, state-aligned network of community volunteers.	**Loss of a multi-year investment.** Not retaining trained human resources is a loss for under-resourced, reactive departments that rely on costly, top-down interventions.	Retaining volunteers and training existing staff to engage with them is cheaper than setting up/ rebuilding programmes from scratch.
Social Gains	**Sustained decline in GBV/ child marriage.** Long-term economic benefits (a more productive, educated, and healthy population) are achieved at minimal annual coordination costs.	**Reversal of gains; harmful norms re-emerge.** This leads to ongoing, long-term economic losses from lost productivity, increased healthcare costs, and intergenerational poverty.	Action adds social capital at negligible cost, whereas inaction incurs huge costs.
Citizen Trust	**Strengthened trust & state legitimacy.** This is a high-value gain at almost zero cost. A trusted state is more efficient (e.g., higher tax compliance, better uptake of public services)	**Declining trust from perceived state withdrawal.** This makes governance more expensive and less effective, as the state must spend more to manage a social contract that has been broken.	Trust-based engagement reduces enforcement costs, improves programme uptake, and impacts spill-over to strengthen the social contract.
International Commit-ments	**Advances SDG 5 standing.** This is a low-cost, high-visibility way for Pakistan to make progress on international indicators and strengthen its position.	**Missed targets on gender equality.** This signals a lack of follow-through, potentially weakening Pakistan's standing and credibility with international partners.	Compliance supports continued development funding and partnerships.

In short, institutional consolidation will transform a time-bound development intervention into a permanent, locally owned public good that enhances legitimacy of the state, efficiency, and social reach in the prevention of GBV, child marriage, and intolerance. At the same time, non-integration risks reversing social gains and increasing future enforcement and welfare expenditures. Therefore, the choice is between the low, predictable cost of sustaining a proven model versus the high, long-term cost of inaction.

7 See for example, "The legitimacy of states and armed non-state actors: Topic guide"; "The State's Legitimacy in Fragile Situations", "Does public trust in government matter for effective policymaking?" (https://www.economicsobservatory.com/does-public-trust-in-government-matter-for-effective-policy-making); and "Nexus Between Citizens' Trust and Good Governance in Public Institutions of South Asia" (https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/00195561241248140)

8 Helliwell, J. F., et al. (eds). World Happiness Report 2023, Chapter 3. New York: SDSN, 2023. Chapter 3: Well-being and State Effectiveness

4. Making It Happen: Clear Pathways for Government Ownership

Integrating Aawaz II mechanisms within government systems can convert fragmented awareness and protection activities into a coordinated system that strengthens policy delivery at low marginal cost. It will reduce social and fiscal burdens of GBV and child marriage and enhance state legitimacy by linking law enforcement with citizen engagement. The key entry points targeting specific departments for sustainable, low-cost integration are:

- **Local Government & District Administration**.
  Punjab Entry Points: District Coordination Committees (DCCs) and Union Council (UC) administration.
  KP Entry Points: Village and Neighbourhood Councils (VC/NC) and Tehsil Councils.
- **Provincial Social Protection Departments (Social Welfare, Women Development, Child Protection).**
  Entry Points: District and sub-district as well as provincial committees of the above departments, as well as the Commissions on the Status of Women and the Ombudspersons office (Office of the Ombudsperson Punjab and Provincial Ombudsman Secretariat KP) for Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace.
- **Youth Affairs Departments.**
  Entry Points: The Punjab Youth Volunteer Programme and the KP Youth Engagement Platform.
- **Education Departments.**
  Entry Points: Directorates of Staff Development (Punjab) and Provincial Institute of Teacher Education (KP), and Provincial Textbook Boards.
- **Provincial Information & Media Departments**
  Entry Points: Information and Culture Department (Punjab) and Information & Public Relations Department (KP) to run public awareness campaigns on social issues.
  Note: These departments have existing recurrent budgets for public service messaging. Integration implies utilizing these pre-allocated funds for Aawaz II behavioural change content rather than creating new budget heads.

These departments already have mandates and budget lines for awareness and protection of children and survivors of GBV and budgets for social welfare that can be utilised for this purpose. Integration leverages these resources, ensuring sustainability at minimal marginal cost.

To activate these entry points, flexible integration pathways and specific, actionable policies based on global and Aawaz II best practices are suggested. Experiences from India, Bangladesh, and other countries, summarised in Figure 3 below, show that governments can successfully scale community-based models when three conditions are met:

Figure 3: Conditions for Successful Scale-up of Community Models



These regional experiences confirm that government ownership not only sustains change but also enhances state legitimacy, service delivery, and citizen trust.

5. Integrating and Scaling Up Community Engagement

Sustaining the impact generated by Aawaz II requires formal institutionalisation within provincial and district systems. To achieve this, the government can utilise three flexible pathways outlined in Table 3 below. These models are not mutually exclusive; provinces and relevant departments may choose one or combine them based on administrative readiness:

Table 2: Integration Pathways

Model	Core Idea	Key Benefits	What is Required?
Co-Ownership (Transition Phase)	Joint management (e.g., Local Government + community forum)	Builds trust & shared accountability.	A directive from the Local Government Department, a departmental coordination mechanism led by the Local Government Department, and the designation of district focal officers and modest operational funds.
Absorption (Institutional Embedding)	Government departments officially absorb and operate Aawaz structures (e.g., AACs as Citizen Facilitation Units, District Forum as Community Liaison Forum)	Ensures continuity, resource allocation, and legitimacy.	Administrative notification by Local Government or Social Welfare Departments; assignment of existing staff for oversight.
Replication (or scaling the programme)	Government departments replicate Aawaz II methodologies (e.g., the ACA model in the youth volunteer programme).	Rapid, low-cost expansion using existing programmes and budgets.	Inclusion in departmental annual work plans, training, and adaptation of curricula, and alignment with budget lines.

Note: These are options, not rigid stages. Provinces can pilot co-ownership while initiating absorption for selected structures.

5.1 A Simplified Implementation Roadmap

Integration does not require complex new projects. It can be achieved through a government-led process of administrative notifications.

i. **Notification**: P&D or Local Government to issue directives recognising Aawaz forums as voluntary consultative bodies.

ii. **Absorption:** Departments (Social Welfare, Youth) to issue orders to include Aawaz-trained volunteers in their existing district committees.

iii. **Scale-Up:** Successful pilots to be replicated province-wide through annual work plans.



6. Policy Recommendations

To ensure the long-term sustainability of efforts against child marriage and gender-based violence (GBV), these recommendations are organised under three strategic priorities: Scaling Up Proven Models, Building Public Sector Capacity for proactive response, and Combining and Optimising Resources to ensure efficiency. The recommendations are grounded in evidence from the Aawaz II programme in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and aligned with international best practices for scaling social norm change[9].

6.1 Scaling Up Proven Community Models

The primary goal is to expand tested initiatives into a standard component of governance, ensuring widespread and lasting impact.

- Formally recognise Village and District Forums (VFs/DFs) as official "Community Consultative Bodies" under the Local Government Act or district coordination frameworks.
  The Local Government and Community Development Department (LG&CDD) should issue an administrative notification to formalise this recognition. They will remain voluntary bodies. The only cost to the government is the administrative issuance and occasional coordination meetings, which can be absorbed into existing district budgets.
- Extend community-based mechanisms, such as the Aawaz Aagahi Centres (AACs) into Citizen Facilitation and Awareness Units for public engagement and service referrals.
  LG&CDD should designate these units within existing Union Council (UC) offices, overseen by UC administrations and managed by trained Aawaz volunteers.

9 United Nation Children's Fund Regional Office for South Asia, Meta-synthesis and meta-analysis of evidence on child marriage in South Asia, December 2024. One of very important guiding principle learnt mentioned in the report is "Norms change interventions appear to be more effective when they implement multiple modalities (media, community mobilisation, training, etc.) and target a diverse range of stakeholders."

- Integrate the Aawaz Change Agent (ACA) model and Social Action Project (SAP) framework into existing provincial youth volunteer programmes, such as the Punjab Youth Volunteer Programme and Youth Volunteers KP, to replicate a proven civic engagement model.
- Introduce civic education and gender equality modules, using tested content of Aawaz II and other civil society programmes, in academic institutions to embed preventive education at scale. *Provincial Education Departments, in collaboration with textbook boards and teacher training institutes, should adapt and roll out these modules.*

Strategic Gain: These recommendations leverage existing local government, institutional, and educational channels, as well as existing budgets, to transition a successful, donor-funded initiative into a sustainable, state-owned public good, extending its benefits.

6.2 Building Public Sector Capacity

These recommendations focus on integrating proven tools and community structures into departmental workflows to make government staff proactive agents of social change.

- Embed the Aawaz II community-led information referral system within the case management protocols of Women Development, Social Welfare, and Child Protection Units for GBVs and child marriage cases.
- Formally integrate Aawaz-trained volunteers and Special Interest Groups (SIGs) as official community liaison for district departments, such as social welfare and Child Protection, to improve service delivery and feedback loops.
- Provide structured training for frontline staff in Local Government, Social Welfare, Child Protection, and Information Departments on tested community engagement, early warning, and behaviour change approaches developed under Aawaz II.

Strategic Gain: These actions will create permanent, zero-cost, two-way communication channels, enhance last-mile service delivery, and build local trust. This will help transform government departments from reactive service providers into proactive agents of social change.

6.3 Combining Resources for Optimal Impact

These recommendations focus on maximising efficiency by combining state and community resources. The goal is to eliminate duplication, reduce costs, and amplify impact by using tested communication assets and shared monitoring systems.

- Use proven Behaviour Change Communication (BCC) materials of Aawaz II in all relevant public awareness campaigns led by Provincial Information and Media Departments, ensuring message consistency and saving design costs.
- Sustain positive behaviour change messaging through SMS, robocalls, TV, FM radio, WhatsApp, YouTube, and transport services. Provincial Information and Media Departments to ensure this.
- Integrate Aawaz II social indicators into existing provincial monitoring dashboards and ensure that the data is disaggregated by age, gender, faith, and disability.
  The P&D department will lead this and issue a notification for integrating social indicators. This data should be used to conduct joint reviews with civil society and academia to track the inclusion of marginalised groups and to guide evidence-based policy decisions.
- **Strategic Gain:** These suggestions aim to improve coordination and data-driven decision-making, achieving greater impact without additional administrative costs.

Together, these recommendations focus on maximising the return on public investment already made by improving system efficiency and productivity remaining within the given resources.

7. The 'Hard Numbers'

To estimate the fiscal implications and social returns of scaling up the Aawaz II model, the Social Return on Investment (SROI) calculators (World Bank SROI model) and global costing frameworks from UNFPA and WHO have been used. Regional benchmarks from India's Bell Bajao! Bangladesh's BRAC-CELP informed assumptions on cost-effectiveness and impact. The table below compares the cost of starting from scratch with that of integrating the existing Aawaz II infrastructure across all districts of Punjab and KP.[10]

Table 4: The Economic Case

Securing a $59 Million Public Asset Currently, the government is positioned to inherit a mature social protection network worth $59 Million at zero capital cost. Besides this monetary cost, starting from scratch would also involve a 2-year service gap and startup risks.		
'Retaining' is a fraction of the cost of 'Rebuilding'.		
Component	Option A Build from Scratch (Cost to replicate in 2 years)	Option B: Sustain Aawaz II (Annual cost to Operate Across Punjab and KP)
Programme Design & Pilots	$10 – $12 M	$0 (Already Done)
Community Structures	$18 – $22 M	$0 (Already Built)
Volunteer Force	$10 – $12 M	$1 M (Refresher Training & Retention)
Behaviour Change Communications	$6 – $8 M	$0 (Already Developed)
Monitoring & Coordination	$3 – $5 M	$2.5 M (Provincial & District Coordination, Monitoring Systems and Oversight)
TOTAL LIABILITY	**$59 Million**	**$3.5 Million / Year**

10 Costs are calculated using the Volunteer Replacement Value (VRV) methodology. It assumes the market rate for a "Community Social Worker" for volunteers, plus 15% administrative overhead for recruitment and vetting – in line with WHO and UNFPA costing benchmarks.

Note: The $3.5 Million annual cost represents an investment to cover the operational expenses to keep thousands of volunteers active, run coordination meetings, and maintain monitoring systems across two provinces.

7.1 The High Cost of Inaction

Walking away is not free. It incurs massive hidden costs to the economy:

- **$800 million Annual GDP Loss:** A joint study by UN Women and NCSW (2020) estimates that child marriage costs Pakistan's economy $0.8 billion in a single year due to lost labour force participation and earnings[11].
- **80 million Lost Workdays:** The Ipsos (2019) study on the economic cost of violence against women in Pakistan estimates an annual productivity loss of 80 million workdays due to absenteeism and trauma[12].
- **System Strain:** Every prevented case saves the state roughly $177 – $354 in immediate police, legal, and shelter costs[13].

7.2 The Social Return on Investment (SROI)

By absorbing the nominal coordination costs, the state ensures a 4.5 to 7:1 Return on Investment.[14] This means that for every $1 the government spends on integrating this model, it pays back the economy up to $7 in the future – by reducing the burden on the justice system, healthcare, and social safety nets, and by enhancing

11 UN Women Costing Study on Child Marriage A Country Level Report 2020-21. UN Women Pakistan

12 Social Policy and Development Centre (SPDC), NUI Galway, Ipsos Mori, and International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW). Economic & Social Costs of Violence Against Women & Girls (VAWG) in Pakistan: Summary Report. April 2019.

13 Copenhagen Consensus Center Cost-Benefit Analysis of Strategies to Reduce Child Marriage in Bangladesh. Bangladesh Priorities, Copenhagen Consensus Center, 2016. License: Creative Commons Attribution CC BY 4.0.

14 SROI Network A Guide to Social Return on Investment. 2009 Updated 2012. Social value monetisation includes both tangible benefits (income, healthcare savings) and intangible benefits (trust, social cohesion), and healthcare/legal cost savings, based on regional studies. We followed Social Value International guidelines, applied a 3% discount rate and conservatively assumed that benefits (increased earnings, avoided health costs) accrue over the beneficiary's lifetime, while costs are front-loaded.

benefits, such as increasing income and improving social cohesion.

Drawing on learnings from Aawaz II and similar regional interventions, these measures offer a practical, low-cost roadmap to institutionalise Aawaz II achievements and advance Pakistan's commitments under SDG 5 on gender equality.

8. Conclusion: A Strategic Pathway to Sustainable Change

Sustaining the momentum of social change achieved under Aawaz II requires the provincial governments of Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to move from partnership to ownership.

This brief has demonstrated that this can be achieved not with new, costly programmes, but through the strategic integration of the Aawaz II model and tools into the existing mandates and budgets of key departments. The cost is minimal because integration pathways leverage the state's existing infrastructure. The choice for the government is clear:

- Ownership secures these gains, enhances state capacity to deliver on its own child and women protection mandates, builds citizen trust, and provides a cost-effective pathway to achieving SDG 5.
- Inaction risks the reversal of hard-won progress, the loss of this vital community of volunteers, and an erosion of the social contract.

Institutionalising the Aawaz II model is an opportunity, a strategic investment in prevention, protection, and inclusive governance. The cost of inaction is higher, social regression, increased fiscal burden, and diminished public confidence.

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