

Aawaz II

Inclusion, Accountability, Reducing Exploitation

The Role of Women in Social Cohesion

Research Study

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Contents

	Acronyms	ii
	Executive Summary	iii
1.	Background	1
1.1	Aawaz II	1
1.2	Inclusive Social Cohesion	3
1.3	Purpose and Objectives	5
1.4	Methodology	5
2.	Findings	8
2.1	Women's Pathways into EWS-ERM	8
2.2	Barriers and Coping Strategies	10
2.3	Women's Roles and Contributions	16
2.4	Impact and Effectiveness	21
2.5	Community Perspectives	25
3.	Recommendations	28
4.	Conclusion	30
	Bibliography	32

Executive Summary

Acronyms

AAC	Aawaz Aagahi Centre
CCAP	Collective Community Action Plan
CF	Community Facilitator
DF	District Forum
DRC	Dispute Resolution Council
ERM	Early Response Mechanism
EWS	Early Warning System
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office
FP	Focal Person
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
IEC	Information, Education and Communication
KP	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
RP	Resource Person
SIG	Special Interest Group
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure
VF	Village Forum

This case study examines the role of women in conflict pre-emption and social cohesion within Aawaz II districts in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). The programme purposely institutionalises women's roles by mandating gender parity in focal persons across all Early Warning System and Early Response Mechanism (EWS-ERM) and by embedding women in Village Forums (VFs), District Forums (DFs), Provincial Forums (PFs), and Aawaz Aagahi Centres (AACs). Collective Community Action Plans (CCAPs) and interfaith dialogues further extend participation across faith, gender, and minority lines. Together, these interventions provide women, often excluded from formal decision-making, with an entry point into community-based conflict resolution and social cohesion processes. The study highlights women's leadership in navigating power dynamics, overcoming challenges, and promoting tolerance beyond mere numerical participation.

This document draws on qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews, group interviews with 20 Aawaz trained female and male EWS-ERM focal persons (FPs) and beneficiaries from five selected districts (total of 49 individuals), and selected case examples from KP and Punjab.

Key Findings

- **Pathways into EWS-ERM:** Women joined through community mobilisation strategy, nominations, and continued engagement and participation in awareness sessions and interfaith exchanges. Training in EWS-ERM SOPs and social cohesion module gave women focal persons the skills and confidence to assume mediation and convening roles. The forums were seen as inclusive alternatives to jirgas and panchayats, making it easier to report issues and giving vulnerable groups more space.

- **Barriers and Coping Strategies:** Women faced multiple barriers, including family restrictions, social pressure, and institutional bias. Intersectional barriers compounded exclusion, minority women faced suspicion from both their own communities and Muslim communities; women with disabilities struggled with stigma, mobility, and limited leadership roles; caste hierarchies restricted visibility; and age norms constrained both young and older women differently. Women navigated these constraints by mobilising family support, invoking programme legitimacy, and working through safe, structured entry points such as special interest groups (SIGs). Most women FPs interviewed confirmed that these barriers often limited their visibility, decision-making authority, and ability to act independently within forums. Despite their resilience and adaptive strategies, such constraints frequently reduced the consistency and influence of their participation in early warning and response processes.
- **Roles and Contributions:** Women acted as first responders, conveners, and mediators in disputes ranging from sanitation and water to inheritance, domestic violence, and interfaith tensions. For instance, during an interfaith dispute in Punjab over worship practices, women FPs intervened swiftly, facilitating dialogue between Christian and Muslim neighbours and securing an agreement on mutual respect during prayer times. Drawing on community trust, firsthand experience, and the legitimacy of Aawaz II, these women detected risks early, responded effectively, and translated rights and tolerance into tangible neighbourhood practices.
- **Recognition and Backlash:** While women gained respect as problem-solvers, many also faced reputational risks, being labelled as outspoken or of bad character. Respondents noted that recognition and their role in social cohesion coexisted with the social norms that restricted them. Women's legitimacy remained fragile and dependent on both family approval and acceptance from officials in the government departments with which the focal persons frequently interacted.

- **Impact and Effectiveness:** Women's participation improved conflict pre-emption, especially in household-level disputes, and emerging tensions before escalation. Their involvement brought greater credibility to mediation efforts, particularly in resource-based conflicts, sectarian and interfaith tensions where male-led interventions might have been viewed as intimidating, especially for women.
- **Community Perspectives:** Acceptance of women's role in social cohesion grew through performance. Initially restricted, women gained legitimacy when they delivered tangible improvements such as resolving inheritance conflict or diffusing interfaith tension, for example, mediating disputes over worship timings or sanitation issues that affected both Muslim and Christian neighbours. Many female FP respondents shared that after they resolved disputes together, people started trusting them and inviting them to meetings. Other female RPs explained that their interfaith efforts, cleaning shared spaces and respecting prayer times, made the community see women as responsible and fair. Elders and mothers played a critical role in multiplying awareness within families. Together, these generational carriers of change helped shift norms around women's roles in conflict pre-emption and social cohesion.

Recommendations

The recommendations are intended for programme partners, local government bodies, and community institutions such as Meesaq Centres, Dispute Resolution Councils (DRCs), and Aawaz Aagahi Centres. They aim to strengthen women's active participation, decision-making, and leadership within community structures, such as EWS-ERM. At the same time, they seek to deepen social cohesion by promoting the recognition and continuation of women's roles in dialogue, mediation, and awareness-building beyond the Aawaz II programme.

1. Strengthen Communication and Awareness Campaigns:

Aawaz II existing tools, videos, social media awareness campaigns, and public service messages etc, should be expanded across districts and digitally archived for use by Meesaq Centres and communities. Training schools, mosques, churches, and women's groups to reuse these materials will sustain awareness beyond the programme. These efforts will also reinforce the role of female mediators by equipping them with visible and credible communication resources that enhance their outreach, legitimise their leadership, and sustain their influence as community educators and mediators after programme closure.

2. Mobilise Male Allies: Aawaz II has successfully engaged men, but these efforts must be scaled. Engaging fathers, brothers, and husbands in sessions on women's social inclusion and their role in social cohesion will move communities from passive endorsement to active facilitation. This approach will also strengthen female FPS' access, credibility, and effectiveness in sustaining conflict pre-emption and social cohesion.

3. Formalise Intersectional Inclusion and Women's Leadership: Interventions should move beyond representation by ensuring that women, including women from religious minorities and women with disabilities, serve as co-chairs and members in district Peace Committees, Human Rights Committees, and Meesaq Centres. Co-leadership within these Committees will institutionalise women's participation in decision-making and ensure that their leadership is integrated into formal governance structures.

4. Document and Disseminate Success: Produce a repository of successful female inclusion in social cohesion interventions, such as interfaith harmony stories, marital dispute pre-emption, and sanitation improvements, to serve as replicable models for other districts and to reinforce women's legitimacy as credible mediators.

Conclusion

Aawaz II has institutionalised inclusive approaches to social cohesion by embedding women as focal persons and leaders in community-based mechanisms. Women's participation has improved early conflict detection, broadened legitimacy, and strengthened community trust in conflict pre-emption. At the same time, their contributions remain constrained by gender norms and intersectional exclusions, requiring sustained institutional support.

Sustainability depends on consolidating linkages with formal state and semi-formal structures, embedding gender balance and co-leadership into rules of committees/formal structures, and transferring IEC tools and case documentation to local institutions. By doing so, Aawaz II and similar programmes can transform conditional, fragile participation into legitimacy and durable inclusion, ensuring that its legacy of enhancing female leadership continues beyond the programme period.





Toba Tek Singh – Preventing Sectarian Escalation

During a Muharram procession, a group of youth blocked a drainage channel, causing flooding that forced the procession to divert through another street and triggered suspicion between Sunni and Shia residents. Village Forum women intervened first to calm tensions, after which VF members coordinated dialogue with religious leaders and the local Amn Committee through the Aawaz Aagahi Centre. By identifying the actual trigger and counselling the youth involved, the forum reframed the incident as individual mischief rather than sectarian provocation, preventing escalation. The intervention strengthened cooperation between communities and led to proposals for improved neighbourhood communication and early warning mechanisms.



1. Background

1.1 Aawaz II

Aawaz II works with local communities in KP and Punjab to promote the rights of children, women, youth and other marginalised groups to strengthen and facilitate their development. The programme works with local partners in 37 districts of Punjab and KP to increase voice, choice, and facilitating women, girls, boys, youth, and marginalised groups (including persons with disabilities (PWDs), transgender persons and religious minorities), to address exploitation and prevent discrimination and intolerance at all levels. Programme partners have facilitated a network of Aawaz Aagahi Centres (AACs), and community forums (at village, district and provincial level) representative of community members and leaders as well as government duty bearers.¹ Through these forums, Aawaz II works directly with marginalised people for their awareness, empowerment and behaviour change to reduce acceptance of harmful and exploitative practices, articulate their demands, engage constructively with the state for accessing services and rights, and improve tolerance, especially for religious minorities, and strengthen social cohesion at the grassroots level.

Aawaz II's work on social cohesion and tolerance combines community-led mechanisms with structured dialogue to pre-empt and resolve conflict across Punjab and KP. At the core is the **Early Warning System and Early Response Mechanism (EWS-ERM)**, embedded in village and district forums, which detects emerging disputes and channels them into inclusive conflict pre-emption processes. These forums are explicitly gender-sensitive, ensuring

¹ From Jan 2020-June 2024, there were over 1,500 Aawaz II forums with 28,144 members, 18,223 volunteers, comprising women, youth, religious minorities, PWDs and transgender persons

that women not only participate but also lead mediation efforts alongside men. This shows how inclusion in EWS-ERM works because inclusion is programme-wide, with women's increased voice and visibility translating into concrete roles within social cohesion. The EWS-ERM activities are complemented by **Collective Community Action Plans (CCAPs)**, where men, women, youth,



religious minorities, and other marginalised groups jointly identify local challenges and agree on non-violent solutions, thereby promoting everyday collaboration. The design of CCAPs explicitly emphasises inclusivity so that minority voices and women's and transgender persons' concerns are integrated into community priorities rather than sidelined. Linking CCAPs to the EWS-ERM and forum structures makes the programme's inclusion focus operational, creating a direct pipeline from participation to social cohesion outcomes.

The programme also convenes gender-inclusive **district-level interfaith dialogues**, including annual events during World Interfaith Harmony Week, where diverse religious leaders, community representatives, and officials explore shared values and build solidarity. In addition, **village-level exchange visits** bring together Muslims, Christians, Hindus, and Sikhs to tour each other's places of worship, share meals, and plan joint initiatives such as cleanliness drives or campaigns against child marriage and gender-based violence. Together, these interventions move beyond symbolic coexistence to institutionalised cooperation, reduce stereotypes,

and strengthen sustainable interfaith networks by linking forums with state structures like Meesaq Centres and Dispute Resolution Councils (DRCs).

This reinforces the programme's overall social cohesion objectives, including in areas under child marriage and gender-based violence, by showing how trust-building, referral pathways, and joint problem-solving reduce tensions and strengthen collaborative community norms.

1.2 Inclusive Social Cohesion

Disruption in social harmony affects men and women differently due to gendered roles, responsibilities, and vulnerabilities. For instance, armed conflict disrupts men's provider roles, leading to psychological stress, while women face increased risks of gender-based violence, including intimate partner and systemic violence.² In addition, women and girls, in particular, suffer heightened vulnerabilities during conflict, as evidenced in South Sudan and Northern Ethiopia, where they are subjected to a spectrum of gendered violence beyond conflict-related sexual assault.³

International Labour Organization (ILO) explicitly notes that advancing women's empowerment and gender equality in fragile, conflict and disasteraffected settings significantly enhances social cohesion, peacebuilding, and resilience.⁴ It identifies women's active participation as a key driver in strengthening communal social relations and reducing conflict dynamics.

Women, however, remain largely excluded from conflict pre-emption and social cohesion processes, particularly in traditional societies

² Devakumar, D., Palfreyman, A., Uthayakumar-Cumarasamy, A., Ullah, N., Ranasinghe, C., Minckas, N., ... & Mannell, J. (2021). Mental Health of Women and Children Experiencing Family Violence in Conflict Settings: A Mixed Methods Systematic Review. *Conflict and Health*, 15(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13031-021-00410-4>

³ Tewabe, D., Azage, M., Wubetu, G., Fenta, S., Worke, M., Asres, A., ... & Geda, Y. (2024). Gender-based Violence in the Context of Armed Conflict in Northern Ethiopia. *Conflict and Health*, 18(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13031-023-00563-4>

⁴ International Labour Organization. (2022). *Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in the World of Work in Fragile, Conflict and Disaster Settings*. ILO. <https://www.ilo.org>

such as Pakistan, despite their potential to play a crucial leadership role in dispute resolution and early conflict detection at the community level.⁵ The participation of women in social cohesion leads to inclusive decision-making processes that take into account the diverse perspectives and needs of every community member. Women at the community level usually detect early signs of conflict along religious, sectarian, political, and gender-based boundaries but continue to be mostly excluded from official methods of conflict prevention and resolution.

Aawaz II institutionalised women's roles in conflict pre-emption and social cohesion through its policy that mandates half of the focal persons in the EWS-ERM and Village, District and Provincial Forums consist of women from different religious backgrounds. Women's leadership faces resistance in the male-dominated regions of KP and Punjab but remains essential for conflict prevention and social cohesion activities.

This study critically examines not just women's numerical inclusion, particularly those from religious minorities, but their actual experience, roles, and influence strategies within these community-led systems. It assesses whether their participation in Aawaz II meaningfully influences conflict pre-emption and social cohesion, and questions whether these mechanisms genuinely challenge existing patriarchal norms or risk reproducing them under new arrangements.

The analysis will also explore what additional steps are needed to make the EWS-ERM and social cohesion more inclusive and effective, particularly by amplifying women's voices and decision-making power, including women from religious minorities and persons with disabilities (PWDs). It will further examine how these forums can support women's roles in social cohesion by providing safe spaces for participation, building their leadership capacities, ensuring their representation in decision-making structures, and integrating

5 Féron, É. (2020). Reinventing Conflict Prevention? Women and the Prevention of the Reemergence of Conflict in Burundi. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, 37(3), 239-252. <https://doi.org/10.1002/crq.21275>

gender-sensitive perspectives into early warning, response, and conflict pre-emption processes.

1.3 Purpose and Objectives

The research aimed to assess how the inclusion of women, including those from religious minorities, in Aawaz II contributed to mitigating local disputes and strengthening social cohesion, and whether their participation reflected meaningful engagement or tokenistic inclusion. It examined the roles and strategies adopted by women in EWS-ERM, interfaith dialogues, and community-led initiatives for conflict pre-emption and social harmony, to understand how these influenced the *status quo* on women's inclusion. The study also sought to draw lessons for enhancing meaningful and effective participation of women, particularly in EWS-ERM, and for adapting and scaling Aawaz II's gender-inclusive conflict pre-emption approaches in similar socio-political contexts. In doing so, the case study generated empirical insights and practical recommendations for strengthening women's roles in community-based conflict prevention mechanisms.

1.4 Methodology

Drawing on qualitative interviews and case studies from Aawaz II forums in Punjab and KP, and available literature, the study documents the strategies, constraints, and contributions of female leaders in Aawaz II's social cohesion work. The study focused on five districts, three in Punjab and two in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, selected purposively to ensure geographic diversity and adequate stakeholder representation.

This study adopted a qualitative case study approach, drawing on:

- i. **Desk Review:** Analysis of academic literature, policy documents, and Aawaz II internal reports to contextualise the role of women in conflict pre-emption and social cohesion.
- ii. **In-depth Interviews:** Twenty semi-structured interviews with

Aawaz II focal persons, female Village Forum members, and interfaith dialogue participants were conducted in Punjab and KP to capture experiential knowledge, strategies, and perceived impact.

	KP	Punjab	Total
Total IDIs	8	12	20
Male IDIs	4	6	10
Female IDIs	4	6	10
Transgender Persons	0	0	0
Average Age	39	35	37
Minorities IDIs	3	7	10
PWD IDIs	1	0	1

iii. **Group Interviews:** Similarly, 5 group interviews with women participants (including those from religious minorities) in CCAPs, interfaith exchange, and EWS-ERM mechanisms to explore collective experiences, barriers, and success factors. Group discussions with partner staff identified cultural and operational challenges in engaging women leaders, effective strategies, perceptions of women's legitimacy, and factors shaping their meaningful participation.

	KP	Punjab	Total
Total Groups	2	3	5
Male Participants	0	0	0
Female Participants	19	30	9
Transgender Persons	0	0	0
Average Age	39	32	35.5
Minorities Participants	5	17	22
PWD Participants	1	0	1

iv. **Case Documentation:** In-depth documentation of select cases where women leaders played a key role in early detection and pre-emption of community tensions, illustrating good practices and lessons for replication.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, primary data were triangulated with secondary literature on gender, conflict pre-emption, and social cohesion. This approach not only contextualised participants' experiences within broader scholarly and policy debates but also highlighted where Aawaz II practices aligned with or diverged from existing evidence, thereby underscoring the study's contribution to both theory and practice.

In line with ethical research practice, participants were briefed on the study's purpose, and written consent was obtained before interviews. Data were anonymised and handled with confidentiality, with steps taken to minimise risks. Interview questions were neutral, non-leading, and culturally sensitive. Names in case studies have been changed for data protection purposes.

The limited number of locations, purposive sampling and reliance on participants within the Aawaz II programme provides findings that are not generalisable, excluding perspectives of those who are not members of these forums. Social desirability bias and gendered power dynamics, especially in conservative settings, may also have affected the openness of participants, despite efforts to ensure confidentiality.

The findings inform policy recommendations to strengthen women's leadership within Aawaz II and similar programmes, to secure sustainability by embedding gender-balanced mediation and referral pathways in local formal institutions. They also offer insights for replicating and adapting the model in other contexts where women's potential role in social cohesion and conflict pre-emption remains underutilised.

2. Findings

This section presents the key findings derived from the primary data collected for this study, which are triangulated with relevant global and local literature. Each subsection is therefore both empirical and analytical, weaving together evidence from the field with insights from existing scholarship to deepen interpretation and situate the findings within broader discussion.

2.1 Women's Pathways into EWS-ERM

This subsection highlights how women engaged in the social cohesion efforts faced resistance due to entrenched gender norms and cultural expectations, and the strategies they developed to navigate these constraints.

2.1.1 Entry

During the community mobilisation process, women and men participated in sessions held at AACs. Implementing downstream partners "Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP)" in each district also conducted outreach through resource persons (RPs) and community facilitators (CFs), who invited community members to attend introductory and awareness-raising meetings. These initial engagements served as the main entry point for community members into the Aawaz II programme. Through these mobilisation meetings and discussions, Village Forums (VFs) were subsequently formed, comprising both women and men who showed consistent interest and participation.

Most respondents framed Aawaz II forums as a novel, inclusive alternative to the previously singular reliance on jirgas. In practice, these platforms shifted dispute handling from *ad hoc*, male-dominated dispute resolution to procedurally clearer, gender-inclusive deliberations that made it

easier for people to report conflicts and encouraged collective problem-solving. The inclusive meetings and referral mechanisms helped translate individual disputes into community tasks, expanding voice for women and minorities and anchoring decisions in structures that can escalate cases beyond the village.

Later in the programme cycle, women focal persons also took part in CCAPs and interfaith exchange visits, which further strengthened their exposure and leadership capacities but were distinct from the initial entry process. Respondents also observed that sustained engagement was crucial, as "after several meetings, women open up and share their concerns".⁶

2.1.2 Nomination

Once the VFs were established, members identified active and trusted individuals, often those demonstrating leadership, communication skills, or commitment to inclusion, to serve as FPs for the EWS-ERM. This nomination process was internally driven, emerging from within the VF membership rather than being externally appointed. Over time, repeated participation in meetings and interactions with downstream implementing partner teams helped nominated women focal persons gain confidence and visibility within their communities.

Some respondents stressed the value of exposure and dialogue, with one participant recalling:

I participated in awareness-raising... and an interfaith visit to a church, where I witnessed how women focal persons were actively encouraging participants to engage in dialogue across faiths. Their leadership not only broadened the scope of participation but also fostered social cohesion by creating spaces where trust and mutual respect could develop.

Male VF member, Abbottabad, 11 September 2025

⁶ IDI with female FP, Sheikhpura, 16 September 2025

Such experiences resonate with wider scholarship on participatory approaches, which emphasises that repeated interaction builds trust, enhances women's agency, and enables collective action in contexts otherwise dominated by male-centric institutions such as jirgas.⁷

2.1.3 Training and Role Uptake

Most women reported that they received training on EWS-ERM standard operating procedures (SOPs) and social cohesion and tolerance module, often citing these as turning points for enhancing their voice in public and practical confidence (e.g., referrals, linkages with relevant departments).

The training covered conflict identification and mapping, reporting mechanisms, referral pathways, mediation techniques, and communication skills, alongside sessions on empathy, respect for diversity, and interfaith harmony. Delivered through a cascade model, master trainers equipped district and village-level facilitators who then trained community members, with periodic refresher sessions reinforcing key concepts and updating participants on evolving community dynamics. This training also integrated practical exercises and role-plays to strengthen women's confidence in leading discussions and resolving disputes constructively. When outreach takes place within the community and tools and processes are culturally sensitive and built on trust, people are more open to participation. In such contexts, women and men are gradually brought into the EWS-ERM process, first as participants in community discussions, then as contributors to identifying local issues, and eventually as focal persons or mediators, because they see the process as legitimate, inclusive, and responsive to their needs.

2.2 Barriers and Coping Strategies

This section maps key barriers to women's participation, household

⁷ Mohamed, M., & Ramadhan, S. (2024). Agents of Change: Women's Leadership in Peacebuilding and Social Transformation in Abu-Shouk Camp. *The Journal of Social Encounters*, 8(1), 142–160. <https://boa.unimib.it/retrieve/bce6c45c-1d73-45ab-8e06-dc48c1223d6f/Mohamed-Ramadhan-2024-The%20journal%20of%20social%20encounters-VoR.pdf>

permission, reputational policing, and institutional bias, and documents how participants mitigate them through proximate outreach, women-led forums, interfaith bridging, and targeted accessibility solutions.

2.2.1 Discriminatory Gender Norms and Intersectional Bias

Women's mobility and public participation are regulated through *izzat* (honour) and fear of *badnami* (disrepute), reinforcing male permission at home, reputational policing in communities, and exclusionary treatment in workplaces. As one respondent put it, "In the beginning, I faced many barriers from my husband, father, and other male relatives".⁸

Most of the female participants in in-depth interviews expressed disappointment that their participation was at times viewed negatively, with women who engaged in public forums being labelled as of bad character. One participant in a group interview in Sialkot further noted that officials disregarded her presence and occasionally denied her entry into meetings. Overall, they illustrate how purdah norms and entrenched institutional cultures intersect to dampen women's voices in conflict-prevention spaces, limiting the legitimacy and impact of their contributions. These patterns mirror research showing how *purdah* norms constrain women's movements and public-facing roles, stigmatise "visible" participation as "bad character," and interact with institutional cultures to dampen voice and access.⁹

Within communities, women's claim to space was frequently interpreted as a threat to established gender norms. Female respondents reported being accused of misleading other women or of overstepping boundaries when they mobilised around issues such as sectarian issues, inheritance, or interfaith interaction. Their

⁸ IDI with female FP, Abbottabad, 11 September 2025.

⁹ Ali, T. S., Krantz, G., Gul, R., Asad, N., Johansson, E., & Mogren, I. (2011). Gender Roles and Their Influence on Life Prospects for Women in Urban Pakistan: A qualitative study. *BMC Women's Health*, 11, 8. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3208374/>

growing awareness of rights was often framed by men as disruptive to household authority. Male participants confirmed this as latent resistance, noting that women's voices carried less weight in public forums and that elders in some communities continued to view women's participation as inappropriate. However, one male participant of group interview in Nowshera seemed hopeful: "Barriers still exist but educated women act as enablers, and local councils are also trusted for accountability."¹⁰

Women FPs from religious minorities also reported that their participation in dialogues and mediations was often restricted, they faced suspicion from both within their own communities and from Muslim community, which narrowed their ability to speak freely and curtailed their role in decision-making. Some described being viewed as outsiders or representing sectarian interests, which limited trust during discussions. Others noted that even when invited to forums, their contributions were often sidelined or treated as symbolic rather than substantive, reinforcing existing hierarchies rather than bridging them. These constraints show how minority women's voices, while occasionally visible in symbolic negotiations, remain structurally limited in more formal conflict-prevention processes.

These gendered barriers intersect with religion, disability, caste, and age, creating more disadvantages for many women. Christian female respondents described both discrimination and new openings for interfaith negotiation, citing small but meaningful agreements on shared water points, graveyard access, and coordinated festival timings. Yet many minority women noted that their participation in dialogues and mediation was constrained by suspicion from both their own communities and the Muslim majority, limiting their influence in decision-making spaces.

Women with disabilities faced layered exclusions but also leveraged institutional platforms for tangible gains.

¹⁰ Male beneficiary and participant of group interview, Nowshera, 22 September 2025

As one participant recounted, "I raised exam-access barriers at the District Forum (DF), and the administration approved a sliding ramp".

IDI with female DF FP, Nowshera, 22 September 2025

For her, the EWS-ERM served not just as a forum for early warning but as a legitimate channel to demand rights. However, many women with disabilities emphasised that stigma, mobility constraints, and reliance on male relatives restricted their participation, and they were rarely considered for leadership roles despite active engagement.

Caste-based restrictions were evident, with several respondents noting that women from low castes were often excluded from public discussions or treated with suspicion when attempting to participate. A participant from the Hindu community explained: "Brahmin families often do not allow their women to participate in such processes",¹¹ believing that public engagement would compromise their family's perceived social status and purity.

Such barriers curtailed women's visibility in mixed forums and required outreach to be channelled through elder mediators or women-only entry points, such as Aawaz II Special Interest Groups (SIGs), to reduce reputational risks. **At the same time, positive shifts were also observed:** in some areas, women from marginalised castes were able to use SIGs and forums to voice concerns about sanitation and water access, gaining recognition for resolving practical community issues that affected all castes alike. These experiences show both the persistence of caste-based exclusions and the potential of inclusive mechanisms to gradually expand space for marginalised women's participation.

According to the data collected for this study, younger women reported mobility and time barriers due to their education or

¹¹ Male Hindu participant of group interview, Sialkot, 17 September 2025

schooling, while older women were sometimes dismissed as having already lived their lives. However, respondents also highlighted that, younger women, particularly if educated, were often preferred for leadership roles, being seen as more capable of learning and engaging.

The data show that intersectional frictions, religious minority status, disability, caste hierarchies, and age, simultaneously constrain and enable women's agency in conflict pre-emption activities. Although exclusions persist, Aawaz II forums provided institutional footholds that women leveraged to negotiate access, reframe disputes and secure incremental recognition of rights.

2.2.2 Institutional Bias

Institutional environments often mirrored these discriminatory gender norms, reinforcing exclusion within formal governance and dispute-resolution structures. Female participants reported that even when invited to official meetings, they were sometimes ignored or denied entry, signalling how bureaucratic gatekeeping replicated patriarchal control. Such patterns align with research showing that institutional norms in conflict-resolution spaces can silence women's voices through subtle exclusion, even in ostensibly inclusive forums.¹²

Such institutional bias intersected with class and education, women from poorer or less-educated backgrounds found it particularly difficult to be taken seriously or to have their cases acted upon. These patterns demonstrate how informal gender expectations, especially around *purdah* and respectability, permeate formal institutions, limiting women's influence and legitimacy.

On the other hand, in areas where district administrations and local councils collaborated closely with Aawaz II, women focal persons reported greater acceptance and responsiveness from officials. This suggests that gender-sensitivity training, structured collaboration, and accountability mechanisms can counter institutional bias and

¹² Interpeace. (2021). Gender-Responsive Peacebuilding: Thematic Review on Gender-Responsive Peacebuilding. (United Nations)

promote women's sustained participation in peacebuilding and conflict-prevention forums.¹³

2.2.3 Coping Strategies and Navigation

Respondents confirmed that women focal persons demonstrated resourceful strategies to navigate restrictive gender norms. A common entry point was building family support, where fathers, brothers or husbands were brought into early sessions to secure permission and legitimacy.

"I took my father to meetings; he then convinced my brother, now I participate freely".¹⁴ This reflects broader findings on how women in Pakistan strategically mobilise kinship and male guardianship to extend their public presence without openly defying household norms.¹⁵ Others relied on coalitions with elders and clergy or sought official cover through programme branding.

"When we represent Aawaz II officially, everyone listens".

IDI with female FP, Abbottabad, 11 September 2025

Coping strategies also extended into structured mechanisms. Trained focal persons and forum members used the EWS-ERM's SOPs to report and process early warnings through clearly defined channels involving duty bearers and local authorities. In one case, repeated submissions through this system helped resolve a long-standing dispute in a mixed-faith village where Christian families had been informally denied access to the local graveyard; as a result, they regained the right to perform burial rituals without interference.¹⁶

¹³ Lwamba, E. et al. (2022). Strengthening Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality in Peacebuilding and Inclusive societies. PMC / Peer-review Article. (pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)

¹⁴ Female participant of group interview, Sheikhpura, 16 September 2025

¹⁵ Sayeed, A., & Ansari, S. (2019). Women's Mobility, Agency, and Labour Force Participation in Pakistan. International Growth Centre. <https://www.theigc.org/sites/default/files/2019/06/Sayeed-and-Ansari-2019-Final-report.pdf>

¹⁶ IDI with male VF member, Nowshera, 22 September 2025

Strategies that use this space, and gradually push its boundaries, are often the most effective. Progress in gender-responsive EWS-ERM usually comes from a few basic features: trusted female and male focal persons, community facilitation teams, safe and confidential reporting for sensitive issues, safe spaces, and clear referral mechanisms to government departments or community notables. When these are combined with outreach close to the community and quick visible wins, such as gaining access to religious spaces, women's participation increases and stigma decreases, creating momentum for wider engagement.¹⁷

At the same time, barriers linked to religion, caste, or disability require special measures. These include women-only entry points (such as Special Interest Groups), support from elders or clergy, and clear records of how issues are handled.

2.3 Women's Roles and Contributions

Drawing on primary and secondary data, this subsection shows how women acted as first responders and conveners across disputes such as inheritance (especially for women), water and sewage, and interfaith intolerance, arranging transport, and assembling duty bearers, elders and clergy contacting RPs and CFs, and at times lawyers. It also shows how women used their roles in EWS-ERM to change local attitudes, proving that they could mediate disputes and bring people together in ways once seen as only men's responsibility.

2.3.1 First Convenors, Responders and Change Agents

Women FPs interviewed for this study addressed a wide range of disputes, ranging from intra-family conflicts and issues (inheritance, early and forced marriage, marital conflict) to community disputes over sanitation, water, and waste management, and further to interfaith and sectarian tensions such as burial rights, church procedure, and festival practices. Their involvement shows how

17 Khan, I. (2022). 'Exploring female jirga as local gendered peace formation and community peacebuilding in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan'. *Sinergi e-Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 2(1), pp. 1–16. <https://spaj.ukm.my/sinergi/index.php/sei/article/view/23>

women play preventive roles from the household to the community, where small actions can stop disputes from growing into serious conflicts. As a woman FP stated "Two brothers were denying their sister her share in inheritance...I called a meeting with elders and religious leaders; they convinced the brothers, and she received her share."¹⁸

In Sialkot, women FPs convened male elders and municipal staff to settle a sewage dispute through collective action. In Nowshera, women-only groups intervened during a violent clash between youth, calming the situation and referring the matter to local authorities through the EWS-ERM mechanism.

In communities, women demonstrated their preventive capacity by resolving communal disputes, directly intervening in violent situations, and even providing emergency care. In Sialkot, they convened with male elders to settle a sewage dispute, while in Nowshera, women-only groups stepped in during an outbreak of violence, de-escalating tensions and channelling the matter through formal structures. Elsewhere, women FPs acted as first responders in crisis situations, taking responsibility for medical care and coordinating with authorities when others hesitated. Women FPs mobilised elders and clergy for moral authority, lawyers for guidance, and local officials for administrative action, lending credibility to mediation efforts and ensuring follow-through via EWS-ERM channels. Female FPs involved in resolving water disputes also illustrate what gendered analyses of water security in Pakistan show: women's everyday management of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) risks, and their role in neighbourhood arrangements, often determines whether scarcity leads to conflict or cooperation.¹⁹

Across districts where data was collected for this study, female FPs said they shifted disputes from personal grievances to shared

18 IDI with female FP, Abbottabad, 11 September 2025

19 Mustafa, D., Akhter, M., & Nasrallah, N. (2019). *Understanding Pakistan's Water-Security Nexus*. United States Institute of Peace. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/09/understanding-pakistans-water-security-nexus>

community responsibilities by framing them in terms of rights and respect. Aawaz II sessions provided them with vocabulary and legitimacy to reopen sensitive discussions on inheritance, mobility, and interfaith tolerance.

On rights, several women FPs said Aawaz sessions gave them the vocabulary to discuss sensitive topics (inheritance, mobility, interfaith, etc.) with families and neighbours. On interfaith and sectarian settings, they translated potential flashpoints into politeness and reciprocity. Primary data illustrate this shift in practice. A female FP narrated a neighbourhood dispute over open sewage flowing in the streets in front of the houses:

“After a detailed discussion, we collectively decided that each household would contribute funds. With the collected amount, we purchased a large sewage pipe and established our own sewage system, which had been a source of conflict in the neighbourhood.”

IDI with female FP, Sialkot, 17 September 2025

Pakistan-focused research links women's awareness and claims-making on inheritance to measurable gains in agency and bargaining power, especially when legal literacy and administrative pathways exist.²⁰

In Aawaz II, **women act as change agents** not by abstract advocacy but by reframing and addressing disputes, translating rights into household decisions. This is precisely how legitimacy is built in constrained settings, through everyday, low-cost commitments that neighbours can accept, while keeping a clear line to institutions when needed.

2.3.2 Recognition and Backlash

Across interviews, most female respondents emphasised that their

20 Rehman, A., et al. (2019). Pathways and Associations Between Women's Land Ownership and Empowerment in Pakistan. PLOS ONE / PubMed Central. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6765811>

visibility in conflict pre-emption brought both recognition and backlash. Many said they were respected as leaders, invited to speak in public fora, and listened to in the village forum meetings. At the same time, several also reported being labelled as too outspoken or of bad character when their roles challenged local gender norms. As one explained, “Officials often disregarded my presence and at times did not let me join meetings in which escalated early warnings were discussed and resolved”.²¹ This duality reflects a broader pattern in Pakistan: women's contributions are increasingly valued, but public leadership still carries reputational risks.²²

Household and kinship dynamics reinforced this tension. Most female FPs noted resistance from husbands, fathers, and brothers, while male FPs openly acknowledged that families remain the first barrier to women's participation. Several respondents highlighted how inclusion was conditional, often requiring male accompaniment or permission. A male participant put it as such “Women who participate should ideally be accompanied by a male family member”.²³

The roles observed here align with the everyday participation in social cohesion and conflict pre-emption, dialogue, rapid response to early warnings, and symbolic norm-setting that help stabilise relations and build incremental legitimacy.²⁴ Across Aawaz II communities, these everyday contributions by women focal persons are particularly important where state services are weak or non-responsive. By convening community members, invoking religious decorum, and using structures like EWS-ERM, women both prevent escalation and expand the boundaries of what is locally seen as acceptable female leadership.²⁵

21 Hindu community elder, group interview, Sialkot, 17 September 2025

22 Bhanbhro, S. (2021). Kinship, Patriarchal Structure and Women's Bargaining with Patriarchy in Rural Sindh, Pakistan. Journal of Research in Gender Studies, 11(2), 39–56. <https://www.lectitopublishing.nl/download/kinship-patriarchal-structure-and-womens-bargaining-with-patriarchy-in-rural-sindh-pakistan-16028.pdf>

23 Male participant of group interview, Sheikhpura, 16 September 2025

24 Mac Ginty, R. (2014). Everyday Peace: Bottom-up and Local Agency in Conflict-affected Societies. Security Dialogue, 45(6), 548–564. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010614550899>

25 Khan, I. (2022)

The primary data show that women's effectiveness was real but constrained. Women could mediate disputes, prevent early marriages, or resolve communal tensions when working under the cover of Aawaz II, yet their legitimacy was fragile, contingent on family sanction and institutional recognition. These findings resonate with Kandiyoti's concept of *patriarchal bargains*²⁶ and with wider evidence from South Asia that women's political and civic roles are often mediated by household permission.²⁷

While Aawaz II forums opened new avenues for women to act as mediators and enablers in conflict pre-emption, their effectiveness remained conditional and negotiated within patriarchal structures.

2.3.3 Leadership of Women from Religious Minorities

Women FPs from religious minority communities often acted as bridge-builders in tense contexts, using symbolic gestures and dialogue to improve and sustain coexistence.

"After attending the exchange visit, our church prepared Eid gift hampers for the local mosque, this gesture promoted harmony".

IDI with Christian female FP, Abbottabad, 11 September 2025

Similarly, another female FP from Sheikhpura described a long-running dispute over a piece of church land claimed by a neighbouring Muslim community. With support from local elders and the VF's EWS-ERM, both sides agreed to resolve the matter through dialogue. The female FP noted, "The church land dispute was settled through dialogue, and even after new Muslim families moved into the area, tensions did not return, reflecting improved understanding."²⁸ These

26 Kandiyoti, D. (1988). Bargaining with Patriarchy. *Gender & Society*, 2(3), 274–290. Sage Publications, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124388002003004>

27 Nazneen, S. (2019). Contentious Women's Empowerment in South Asia. *Contemporary South Asia*.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09584935.2019.1689922>

28 IDI with Christian female FP, Sheikhpura, 16 September 2025

accounts highlight the preventive role of minority women leaders, who anchor interfaith relations not in rhetoric but in practical reciprocity and everyday acts of respect. Other focal persons underscored similar practices, "We agreed to conduct joint activities such as neighbourhood clean-ups, which were framed as both health promotion and interfaith solidarity."²⁹ Such acts are low-cost but high in symbolic value, signalling respect across faith lines and lowering the risk of escalation in mixed settings.

In Aawaz II forums, these dynamics translated into concrete preventive gains, interfaith exchanges reduced suspicion, symbolic reciprocity stabilised relations after disputes, and minority women leaders gained standing as credible mediators. However, their contributions remain contingent on fragile legitimacy, highlighting the need for institutional reinforcement through inclusive EWS-ERM protocols that recognise the added weight, and vulnerability, of minority women's leadership.

2.4 Impact and Effectiveness

This subsection examines how women's participation in community-led EWS-ERM in KP and Punjab has influenced decision-making processes and improved the handling of conflict triggers. It highlights shifts in voice, authority, and institutional practices that have made conflict pre-emption more responsive and inclusive.

2.4.1 Early Risk Identification

Women's participation in deliberative spaces in KP and Punjab has reshaped both the scope of discussions and the speed with which risks are identified. Respondents highlighted that women often raise concerns earlier than men, particularly regarding household disputes, neighbourhood tensions, and issues affecting young people. This earlier surfacing of risks has allowed committees to act before disputes escalate into larger conflicts. "In the beginning, women were not allowed to sit in discussions... today, their voices are being heard

29 IDI with female FP, Sialkot, 17 September 2025

and valued.”³⁰

In Sialkot, the presence of women in EWS-ERM was associated with greater trust and accessibility. Several community members reported that women were seen as better listeners and more approachable, particularly for sensitive issues such as domestic violence or inheritance disputes. These personal accounts illustrate how women’s contributions have not only broadened the inclusive consultation but also strengthened predictability of signs of conflict, conflicts are now more systematically routed through community to EWS-ERM. This aligns with wider evidence that women’s participation in decision-making increases the effectiveness of early-warning and preventive mechanisms.³¹

2.4.2 Institutional Response

Community trust in Aawaz II stems from its inclusive design, which purposefully positions women as active participants in conflict pre-emption and social cohesion. Respondents repeatedly stressed that women’s participation was not symbolic but pivotal in resolving complex and sensitive disputes such as community disputes, sectarian rivalry and interfaith tensions. Their legitimacy stemmed from two interlinked factors: first, the Aawaz II platform itself, which gave women recognised space and confidence to engage in dispute resolution without breaching social norms; and second, the programme’s ability to prompt constructive responses from local elders and duty bearers, strengthening trust in women focal persons.

In many cases, women’s presence itself shifted dynamics of legitimacy. In Nowshera, their immediate intervention in an escalating conflict was described as both courageous and institutionally effective:

³⁰ Mixed group interview, Abbottabad, 11 September 2025

³¹ Paffenholz, T. (2014). Civil Society and Peace Negotiations: Beyond the Inclusion–exclusion Dichotomy. *Negotiation Journal*, 30(1), 69–91. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nejo.12046> (direct.mit.edu)

“A conflict started among children and escalated into violence against a widow and her children... only women were present in nearby homes. The women intervened, stopped the violence, and involved the AAC. Through dialogue, the conflict was resolved, and the aggressors apologized”.

Male participant, group interview, Nowshera, 22
September 2025

By strategically embedding women in forums and providing a recognised pathway to duty bearers, Aawaz II ensured that women’s contributions were not marginal but integral to conflict pre-emption.

2.4.3 Women’s Effectiveness

Women spoke about how they negotiated restrictive norms, through persistent claims to space and voice. Women focal persons described the limitations they faced at home and in public spaces, and how they managed to use these as entry points for effective action. A female FP recalled: “Before the Aawaz II programme, I lacked confidence and faced many restrictions at home... I was not allowed to raise my voice about my rights”.³² She explained that her initial participation became possible because Aawaz II activities were introduced through trusted local facilitators and held within walking distance, which helped reassure her family and secure permission to attend.

Women reported building credibility through active participation in conflict pre-emption and public problem-solving. In several cases, this credibility came after long engagement within the Aawaz II forum, where women had already established trust as organisers of awareness sessions or community cleanliness drives. These visible, non-confrontational roles helped them gain the confidence of male elders and local authorities. A female FP explained how she mediated

³² Female participant of group interview, Sheikhpura, 16 September 2025

a family land dispute: “After listening carefully to both sides, a solution was agreed upon: the house would be divided so that one brother received the front portion while the other received the back”.³³ She was able to do so because both families had earlier participated in Aawaz II awareness meetings, and the VF supported her to convene the dialogue. The involvement of a respected religious elder further legitimised her role and ensured both parties accepted the outcome.

2.4.4 What Works

Across districts where data was collected, women’s effectiveness in conflict pre-emption relied less on individual charisma and more on strategic framing, institutional positioning, and supportive networks.

First, framing disputes around community resources, such as water, sanitation, inheritance, or respect for religious practices, allowed women to shift conflicts from personal issues to collective responsibilities. In practice, this meant linking water and sanitation drives to neighbourhood health and explaining that early or forced marriages not only harm the girl but also disrupt community wellbeing by increasing dropout rates, poverty, and health risks, making it a public rather than a private concern.

Second, effectiveness increased when women operated within institutionalised spaces such as VFs, AACs, or DFs. These platforms formalised women FPs’ authority, allowing them to raise issues, mediate disputes, and escalate cases to mandated ERM, if they could not resolve them at the community level. Within these structures, their voices carried greater weight because they were anchored in a recognised mandate rather than presented as individual claims. Male beneficiary respondents themselves acknowledged that when community members acted under the Aawaz II banner, their interventions were taken seriously by officials and neighbours alike.

Third, success often depended on allies. Supportive male relatives provided legitimacy at the household level, while sympathetic religious leaders or state officials provided a buffer against

community backlash. For example, when sanitation or land disputes risked escalation, women focal persons were most effective when their efforts were reinforced by clerics, councillors, or district administrators.

2.5 Community Perspectives

This section provides details about how community members experienced and interpreted women’s participation in conflict prevention. It shows how practical problem-solving, recognition, and intergenerational influence shaped acceptance and legitimacy at the local level.

2.5.1 Acceptance through Performance

Community narratives provide important insights into how women’s roles in conflict prevention are understood and valued at the local level. While the programme design and structures created new entry points for women, it was everyday experiences, whether women could resolve disputes and mediate tensions, that shaped acceptance.

Women respondents described how community attitudes changed once they started solving their real problems. At first, many women FPs faced doubt or resistance, but when they helped with issues like blocked drains, sewage, water shortages, or stopping child marriages, people began to respect them. One woman FP explained that although families once refused to let her in, after repeated awareness efforts she is now welcomed and appreciated.³⁴ Others reported that their work led to public recognition as leaders in the community.

This shows a clear pattern, performance builds trust. When women delivered visible improvements, their standing as community mediators and leaders grew stronger. This matches wider research in Pakistan and beyond, which finds that people are more likely to accept new leaders when they see them delivering fair and practical results. As the *World Development Report 2017* notes, legitimacy

33 IDI with female FP, Toba Tek Singh, 18 September 2025

34 IDI with female FP, Abbottabad, 11 September 2025

depends not only on solving problems but also on fair and predictable ways of doing so.³⁵

2.5.2 Generational Change

Respondents highlighted how norm change was carried forward by generational anchors, particularly mothers, elder women, and young people. Older women were seen as especially influential in re-shaping attitudes on issues like child marriage. Once they received training through Aawaz II activities, they often transferred this knowledge to men in their families, which in turn helped delay or prevent marriages and legitimised women's education. Because elder women were already embedded in household and kinship decision-making, their acceptance of new practices made these ideas more acceptable to the wider community. This intergenerational transfer of awareness not only protected individual rights but also strengthened social cohesion by promoting shared responsibility for wellbeing and reducing tensions around practices that previously divided families and communities.

At the same time, youth were described as more open to visual and media-based interventions. Respondents noted that short video screenings, captured the attention of young audiences and provided entry points for discussion around rights, tolerance, interfaith harmony, and conflict prevention. Young men were described as receptive to these media tools, which broadened their understanding of women's roles and interfaith coexistence.

Overall, the data suggest that mothers and older women acted as multipliers of norm change within families, while youth became early adopters of new ideas when exposed through visual media. This pattern aligns with wider evidence that durable change in social norms spreads through trusted figures such as mothers and elders and through visual or collective communication that models alternatives in accessible ways.

³⁵ World Bank. (2017). World Development Report 2017: Governance and the Law. Washington, DC. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/25880>



Women's Mediation in a Mixed-Faith Community

In a small town in northern Punjab, tensions flared when loud music from a Christian family's celebration coincided with the Muslim call to prayer (azaan). A confrontation between the two households, raised fears of escalation into a broader conflict.

Female FP and female VF member, supported by AAC resource persons, intervened on the spot. They calmed both sides, reframed the incident as an unintended misunderstanding, and stressed the importance of mutual respect in multi-faith settings.

The dispute was resolved peacefully, with both families agreeing to better communication in the future. The case underscored how timely intervention by trained women mediators can prevent minor disputes from spiralling into communal conflict.



3. Recommendations

The following recommendations are intended for programmes, CSOs and local government entities such as Meesaq Centres, and DRCs. They also aim to strengthen women's active participation, decision-making, and leadership within community structures, such as EWS-ERM. In doing so, they promote stronger institutional linkages between community forums and formal governance mechanisms, ensuring that women's contributions are embedded within local systems of conflict prevention and response. At the same time, they seek to deepen social cohesion by ensuring that women's roles in dialogue, mediation, and awareness-building are recognised and sustained beyond the Aawaz II programme.

3.1 Strengthen Communications Materials and Awareness Campaigns

Aawaz II has already developed effective tools, videos, social media awareness campaigns, and public service messages etc. that can easily be used across districts. All IEC materials should be archived digitally and transferred to Meesaq Centres and community institutions, so that awareness-raising can continue without external facilitation. Schools, mosques, churches, and women's community groups should be trained to reuse these tools independently, ensuring their relevance beyond the programme's life. Strengthening these efforts will also reinforce the role of female FPs by providing them with visible, credible communication resources that enhance their outreach, legitimise their leadership, and sustain their influence as community educators and mediators after programme closure.

3.2 Mobilise Male Allies

Women's access and participation in already established forums,

Meesaq Centres and peace committees can be ensured and scaled up with support from male allies. Engaging fathers, brothers and husbands in sessions that sensitise them to the social inclusion of women, and specifically their role in social cohesion, will actively facilitate women's inclusion, rather than merely endorse it. This will strengthen the role of female FPs by improving their access to community forums, enhancing their credibility, efficiency, and linkage for sustained conflict pre-emption and social cohesion.

3.3 Formalise Intersectional Inclusion and Women's Leadership

Move beyond representation by ensuring that women, including women from religious minorities and women with disabilities, serve as co-chairs and members in Peace Committees, Human Rights Committees, and Meesaq Centres. Co-leadership within these Committees will institutionalise women's participation in decision-making, and ensure that their leadership is integrated into formal governance structures.

3.4 Document and Disseminate Success

Successful case studies of women in social cohesion interventions (e.g., mediation in inheritance, interfaith burial agreements, land dispute resolution, etc.) should be compiled and shared with Meesaq Centres, peace committees, human rights committees and DRCs and in communities. Documenting lessons learned and models of gender sensitive and inclusive social cohesion and dispute resolution, will guide other programmes and interventions, facilitating wider acceptance of women's role in conflict prevention.

4. Conclusion

Aawaz II has already laid strong foundations by linking focal persons to Meesaq Centres, peace committees, human rights committees, and DRCs. Sustainability requires:

- embedding gender balance and co-leadership into the rules of formal committees,
- sharing IEC tools, SOPs, and case documentation with state-linked centres,
- securing intergenerational and intersectional representation in governance forums.

By firmly rooting women's roles in these formal conflict-prevention mechanisms, Aawaz II can ensure that its legacy endures beyond the project period, transforming conditional participation into structural legitimacy and long-term inclusion.



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Building Unity: Women's Leadership in Resolving a Church Governance Dispute

In a town in central Punjab, tensions flared when two Christian sects disagreed over constructing a new church. The majority group blocked the plan through a court stay order, heightening unrest and fears of outside interference.

Focal person Grace John and community member Salma Yaqoob intervened swiftly, holding dialogue sessions with both sides and drawing on AAC support. Emphasising shared faith and the risks of division, they brokered a compromise - the existing church would be shared, with worship on different days.

The agreement diffused conflict, strengthened community harmony, and showed how women's mediation can turn potential sectarian strife into peaceful coexistence.

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