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Aawaz II

Aawaz II
Inclusion, Accountability, Reducing Exploitation

The Aawaz II Model: Sustaining Inclusion through Community Ownership and Social Capital

Key Findings

Research Study

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Disclaimer:

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

ACA	Aawaz Change Agent
AAC	Aawaz Aagahi Centre
CNIC	Computerised National Identity Card
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DF	District Forum
DSP	Downstream Partner
DYO	District Youth Office
ERM	Early Response Mechanism
EWS	Early Warning System
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
KII	Key Informant Interview
KP	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
NADRA	National Database and Registration Authority
PF	Provincial Forum
RTI	Right to Information
SIG	Special Interest Group
VF	Village Forum

Executive Summary

Programme Background

Aawaz II is a community-based programme managed by the British Council Pakistan and funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). Operating since 2020 across 37 districts in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), the programme works to reduce child marriage, address gender-based violence (GBV) and build social inclusion for women, persons with disabilities, religious minorities and transgender persons. It does this through a network of Village and Neighbourhood Forums, District and Provincial Forums, Aawaz Aagahi Centres, Aawaz Change Agents, Special Interest Groups and Early Warning and Early Response Mechanisms. The programme's behaviour change model moves communities through five stages: from information dissemination through awareness building and commitment to action, and, ultimately, social transformation.

This study builds on the two earlier studies that documented significant shifts in community attitudes and practices around child marriage and GBV prevention across Punjab and KP and how the programme's architecture of community forums was enabling marginalised communities to move from symbolic to substantive participation in local governance. Together, these studies confirmed that the programme had produced observable change. This third Aawaz II qualitative research asks how the programme's community engagement model enables the transition from programme-led interventions to community-owned inclusive practices and what conditions enable or constrain that transition. It was conducted across seven districts in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, including two districts, Lodhran and Haripur, where the programme concluded its planned cycle in 2022, alongside five active programme districts. This enables the study to examine what persists when external,

funded facilitation ends, not only what looks promising while the programme is present. Information was gathered through 16 Key Informant Interviews and 11 Focus Group Discussions with 88 participants, drawn from women's and men's Village Forum groups, Aawaz Change Agents, persons with disabilities, transgender persons, religious minorities, government officials, programme staff and District and Provincial Forum leaders.

Key Findings

i) Building community ownership and social capital

The most consistent finding across all sites is that *internalised values, transformed self-perception and a felt sense of obligation to act persist* more durably than the formal programme structures through which they were developed. The distinction between structural social capital, the forums, centres and roles created by the programme and cognitive social capital, the trust, shared norms and mutual obligation that participants carry independently of any structure, is the analytical core of the study. In communities where the programme cycle has concluded, forums continue to prevent child marriages, navigate government institutions and advocate for policy change without programme prompting. A District Forum member in Lodhran demonstrated this during the research session itself: when another participant raised a family member's situation, he responded immediately with a step-by-step referral plan, offered his personal phone number and named a specific contact. The forum's work was present without any programme. Communities with shorter engagement histories show genuine motivation and conscientisation, but community ownership is a complex and non-linear process that requires time and depth to develop.

Locally rooted individuals who bridge community members to each other and to government institutions emerge as the decisive sustainability variable. Where multiple such individuals operate independently across a community, ownership is distributed and durable: if one person is unavailable, the community's capacity does

not collapse. In Haripur, community mediation, rights navigation for women and child marriage early response each operate through different individuals with their own networks and institutional relationships, none of whom depend on the others being present. When a sectarian crisis erupted following a killing in a nearby village, forum members visited the affected family and de-escalated the situation without any programme instruction. In Sialkot, by contrast, all community action routes through one person. When asked what would happen in his absence, the group was uncertain. The difference between these two configurations is not commitment or knowledge: it is whether capable people are distributed across the community or concentrated in one place.

Bridging capital across religious lines has become particularly well-established in several communities. In Haripur, Shia and Sunni community members have independently sustained a mutual protection arrangement for each other's religious processions, confirmed as entirely community owned. In Nowshera, inter-faith visits and joint community activities continue without programme prompting. These represent some of the clearest evidence of social capital that has moved beyond programme facilitation.

ii) The extent to which norm change has taken root

Child marriage prevention and GBV help-seeking norms have, in communities with sustained engagement, moved into genuine social norm territory. The mechanism is not primarily formal legal awareness but the cumulative experience of collective action that makes norms visible and mutually expected. In Haripur, communities describe multiple interlocking enforcement mechanisms, including nikah registrar CNIC checks and collective family visits, as routine rather than exceptional. This pattern was confirmed independently across Sialkot and Sheikhupura in Punjab and validated by a government official who confirmed eight to ten child marriages stopped in her area. In Lodhran, communities stop child marriages and inform the local organisation afterwards: the action happens first, the reporting comes later.

The internal mechanism that sustains this change is conscientisation: a shift from unreflective acceptance of one's situation to a named understanding of it as something that can be changed. A District Forum member in Lodhran articulates this as a debt of conscience he carries independently of any programme presence. Among religious minority participants, the most common expression is the elimination of fear as a governing condition. It is this internal shift, not the forum structure, that produces behaviour that persists without external prompting.

Women's mobility and decision-making authority have improved measurably but fall short of full autonomy. The shift from seeking permission to informing husbands is real; it is also partial.

Inclusive practices towards transgender persons demonstrate that dignity and respect are present within programme meeting spaces. Participants within these forums and spaces accept transgender persons as equally important and include their voices and opinions in the discussion.

However, the norm change appears to be more programme-dependent rather than community-sustained, as it is not reflected outside the meeting spaces. This reflects not a failure of community dialogue but the persistence of material and institutional barriers, including police harassment, denial of housing, CNIC registration obstruction and collapse of institutional support points, that community mobilisation alone cannot address.

iii) Institutional ownership and its limits

Where communities have sustained engagement with government institutions and made specific demands on them, those institutions have changed how they work. Across the programme, approximately 200 Aawaz II community volunteers have been formally incorporated into government committees. In Nowshera, Change Agents have been merged into the District Youth Office (DYO) volunteer corps, confirmed by the DYO. In Haripur, the Bait-ul-Mal Deputy Director continues to convene community meetings across postings. In

Sheikhupura, a government official with a law enforcement role has incorporated community mediation into her professional practice.

The critical distinction in institutional ownership is between accessed and mobilised capital. Communities that know institutional pathways exist have accessed capital. Communities that activate those pathways independently to produce outcomes have mobilised it. The transition from one to the other is the ownership transition this study documents. The evidence for this transition is clearest in the domain of women's independent institutional access. In one post-cycle community, District Forum members describe a shift from women needing accompaniment to reach National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) offices to approximately half of women now going independently, navigating the process and completing documentation renewal on their own. The pathway existed before. What changed is that women now activate it without intermediary.

In Nowshera, a minority District Forum member used the Right to Information mechanism he had learned through the programme to file an application independently, escalate it to a Supreme Court Commission and produce a province-wide readvertisement of minority teacher posts, along with a provincial notification reducing competitive examination thresholds for minority candidates. These outcomes required no programme involvement beyond the initial orientation. In Khanewal, government officials respond when the programme name is invoked but revert when it is not. The community can produce outcomes now, but is using a credential that belongs to the programme rather than to themselves. This is not a capital access problem: the pathways are known and being activated. It is a sustainability problem: the credential that activates them will not survive programme exit. The community has not yet developed the independent institutional standing that would allow the same outcomes to be produced in the programme's absence.

A consistent finding across all sites is that District and Provincial Forums do not self-convene: multiple District Forum members independently and across both provinces confirmed that formal

forum meetings require programme or government initiation. This is not a failure of individual capacity, since the same individuals who report forum dependency also report the autonomous individual actions described above. The structural explanation is that the Aawaz district team member holds the secretariat function and meeting funds are managed by the implementing partner, meaning formal convening requires an external party regardless of community willingness. It is a consistent feature of the transition from programme-facilitated to community-owned collective action: communities have claimed the practice of acting collectively on problems but have not yet claimed the structure of convening themselves.

iv) Differential manifestation of ownership across marginalised groups and sustainability conditions

The pattern of ownership across marginalised groups is consistent across all sites. Women with sustained engagement show the most durable and distributed ownership. Religious minorities show intermediate ownership, with strong individual leaders achieving significant institutional outcomes. Persons with disabilities show variable ownership that correlates closely with individual social capital. Transgender persons show the most programme-dependent ownership, with the least evidence of community-sustained norm change. This hierarchy reflects differential structural conditions, not differential community capacity. Where material and institutional conditions actively undermine a community's safety and economic viability, normative change in meeting spaces cannot consolidate into owned practice.

Communities with shorter engagement histories show genuine early-stage conscientisation and motivation, but remain programme-dependent in their institutional access. The transition from programme-dependent to community-owned engagement requires depth and duration that shorter cycles cannot produce.

Conclusion:

In summary, three patterns run consistently across the evidence. The first is the critical role of mediating individuals in sustaining community ownership. The second is social norm change moving from compliance to ownership where sustained engagement has produced genuine internalisation. The third is differential manifestation of ownership across marginalised groups, reflecting structural conditions more than community capacity. This evidence suggests that depth of community ownership does not move in a simple linear relationship to programme inputs: external factors and the environment influence the pace and depth at which ownership develops across different communities and groups.

Recommendations

i. Programme design and implementation:

The most important implication is that depth of cognitive embedding matters more than breadth of structural activity. Exit timelines should be based on whether communities can independently mobilise institutional pathways, not only on whether the programme cycle has been completed. Before reducing facilitation, programmes should map where mediating capacity is concentrated and actively develop additional capable individuals so that no single person holds all institutional connections. The secretariat function and meeting resource management should transfer to community-controlled arrangements before exit, not at it: where Downstream Partners (DSP) holds these, communities cannot independently convene even when they are willing. Activities designed to continue after programme exit, including peer support networks, early warning mechanisms and community referral functions, should be structured as volunteer-owned from the outset. A structured transition protocol, including a practical test of independent institutional navigation before exit, should be developed and applied in every community before facilitation withdraws. For highly marginalised groups with complex internal governance structures or specific legal vulnerabilities, programme engagement approaches should be preceded by political economy analysis and genuine participatory consultation.

ii. Government engagement:

The formal inclusion of Aawaz volunteers in government committees is a model that government and civil society organisations (CSOs) can adopt and should be extended and documented for use by other programmes. Institutional protection for community members who report child marriage, GBV and rights violations should be ensured through policy actions that facilitate community engagement and mitigate vulnerability. Village Forum members should be equipped with the institutional knowledge and documented relationship records to introduce themselves and their work to any new government official independently, reducing dependence on any specific official's continued tenure. The barriers to inclusion, participation and decision-making of marginalised groups should be addressed through timely policy action in support of community mobilisation, including facilitation of CNIC and birth registration, and access to essential services and social protection. These asks should be pursued by CSOs through government engagement and advocacy channels at provincial and federal levels.





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