

2016 - 2026

10 YEARS

10 YEARS OF
THE WOW FESTIVAL
IN PAKISTAN

COMMUNITIES THAT
SUSTAIN

معاشرہ

SPOKEN, SHARED,
DOCUMENTED

باتیں

STORIES THAT
SHAPED A DECADE

گائیاں



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About British Council

The British Council is the UK's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities. We support peace and prosperity by building connections, understanding and trust between people in the UK and countries worldwide. We do this through our work in arts and culture, education and the English language. We work with people in over 200 countries and territories and are on the ground in more than 100 countries. In 2022–23 we reached 600 million people.

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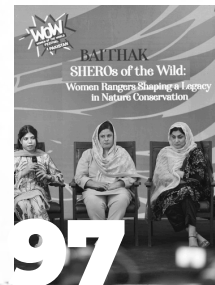
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The Road *Ahead*

JAMES HAMPSON

Country Director, Pakistan



As we celebrate a decade of Women of the World (WOW) Pakistan, it is right that we take a moment to reflect on what 10 years of this Festival has meant since that first gathering in Karachi.

Giving space to women and girls and using the transformational power of arts and culture in celebrating what works, has its own value, but where WOW really comes into its own is hearing what's needed to make real change.

I am proud to lead the British Council's work in Pakistan. Where this matters most to me is changing the picture for those whose voices are not heard. WOW silences the noise that prevents this happening, turning the volume up and shining the spotlight on the struggles and successes of women and girls.

That has been crucial since 2016 when WOW found a new home in Karachi and we brought this Festival to South Asia for the first time.

The spirit of WOW, as was intended by its founders and because of Jude Kelly's leadership, is evident and at work in this zine. It is a reminder of the energy WOW creates and the stories are a faithful documentation of the journey so far.

I am hugely grateful to the activists, artists, audiences who have shaped WOW Pakistan into what it is today. We have been blessed with brilliant partners and curatorial teams along the way.

As we look ahead, the British Council remains committed – as do I – to supporting platforms that elevate women's voices, broaden opportunities for girls, and strengthen the arts as a force for connection, optimism, and change. All of which is in keeping with the founding principles of WOW.

Thank you for being part of this remarkable story

JUDE KELLY

CBE, Founder Director

When I founded WOW - Women of the World 15 years ago I always dreamt of it taking root in Pakistan.



I knew that Pakistan had a proud history of individuals and communities determined to build a positive future for women and girls, and remove any gender barriers to progress. They wanted us all to dream big and to celebrate the huge achievements of women in both rural and urban communities. I hoped the WOW movement could support their work and be a further catalyst for change in the country. I wanted Pakistan to bring its expertise and experience to the WOW global partners that were springing up across every continent.

So it was a joy to me when the first WOW Festival was launched in Karachi and thousands of people arrived for a menu of inspiring stories, invigorating, challenging debates, celebrity interviews, energetic displays of everything from martial arts to hip hop dance, all within the classic WOW Festival model of food and market stalls, pop up music, poetry and spoken word and of course, our Under 10's Feminist Corner where boys and girls met to sort out the future!

The first wonderful festival was also laced with sadness as we remembered our friend Sabeen Mahmud who had offered to lead the event but was assassinated for her wider activism. Since then we have been constantly grateful to all the individuals and partners who have grown this year on year, woven together with the steadfast stewardship of the British Council and of course, our Global Founding Partner Bloomberg.



What an extraordinary achievement it's been so far.

In the last decade in both cities, towns and villages, WOW Pakistan has become a powerful driver for starting new conversations, spurring on initiatives and suggesting new possibilities for change.

We're thrilled that WOW Pakistan will be showcased internationally via WOW 365, our new global digital platform, driven by its membership, that is bringing together WOW audiences across the world to drive the energy and optimism we all need to continue to fight for gender equality (*do sign up!*).

Progress is tangible and that's a wonderful thing to recognise. But no one can pretend that the world is less challenging now. New technologies, climate change, harsh economic conditions and a turbulent political environment are affecting all of us, and women in particular are affected disproportionately as well as continuing to suffer from an epidemic of gender based violence. The need for WOW is as great as ever.

Last year in Lahore, the WOW Festival was a riot of activity and also a place of deep reflectiveness and resolve. This year, to mark the 10th anniversary, we'll gather in Karachi to strengthen our stamina and optimism through the WOW celebrations.

Thank you WOW Pakistan for being such a steadfast and imaginative beacon, as we continue to journey towards a brighter future .

LAILA JAMIL

Regional Director Arts, South Asia

WOW Pakistan has always asked a simple but demanding question: what happens when women are given space—and trusted with it?



Over the years, I have seen WOW grow not through spectacle, but through intention. It has been shaped by careful listening, by an insistence on artistic and intellectual freedom, and by a deep respect for local voices. Rather than importing answers, WOW Pakistan has made room for inquiry—allowing artists, speakers, and audiences to define what feminism looks like in this place, at this moment.

From the British Council’s perspective, supporting WOW meant committing to continuity. It meant backing a process that values experimentation, dialogue, and risk, even when the cultural and political climate makes such commitments difficult. WOW reminded us that meaningful cultural work is not fast, tidy, or easily measured — but it is essential.

What distinguishes WOW is its understanding of access as a creative act. By removing barriers, it changed who could enter the room and what could be said once there. The result has been a space that is challenging, generous, and alive to complexity.

This zine is not a summary or a celebration alone, but a trace of the relationships, ideas, and labour that have sustained WOW Pakistan over a decade. It points to a future that is still being shaped—by women who continue to speak, make, question, and build together.

It has been a privilege to stand alongside this work, and to witness the possibilities that emerge when trust is placed at the centre of cultural practice.

To every artist, speaker, partner, volunteer and participant who has shaped WOW over these ten years, thank you. Your contributions remind us why the arts matter, especially in moments of challenge and change.

What we built *together*

F O R E W O R D

AMNEH SHAIKH-FAROOQUI
CHAIR AND CURATOR,
WOW PAKISTAN



Writing these words feels almost like a fever dream: remembering someone else's life while knowing, unmistakably, that it was my own. It is unreal and exhilarating in equal measure.

WOW Pakistan began with a simple belief: women's voices matter, and when they are heard fully and without apology, something shifts. From the first festival in Karachi in 2016, WOW set out to make space for those shaping families, communities, and industries, often without recognition or rest.

The decade since taught us that change does not move in straight lines. It circles, returns, and asks to be relearned. Each festival invited us to pause, listen closely, admit what we did not yet understand, and recalibrate: sometimes gently, sometimes under pressure. What emerged was not certainty, but clarity: about why we gather, and how.

Over ten years, WOW Pakistan grew far beyond an annual moment. Across eight full festivals, one gathering, and 37 additional events across three cities till 2025, more than 840 artists, speakers, and contributors shaped this space. Over 65,000 people gathered with us in person. Beyond festival grounds, conversations travelled widely, reaching 152 million people online and over 200 million through media and press. These numbers matter not as proof of scale, but as evidence of access: voices amplified and stories carried far beyond where they began.

This journey is a testament to the labour, friendships, generative tension, and care that carried us here. Feminist futures are not abstract or distant. They are already unfolding wherever women gather to speak, create, learn, and advocate. Joy is political. Visibility, especially where access to public space is constantly negotiated, is power.

I came into WOW thinking about platforms and programming. I leave each year thinking about people: how power moves when it is shared; the discipline of listening across difference; the courage it takes to say, “I don’t know,” and mean it.


Leadership, I have learned, is not solitary or certain. It is presence - communal, accountable, and rooted in trust.

This work unfolded against a difficult backdrop: a global pandemic, floods, economic strain, shrinking freedoms, escalating violence. WOW was never separate from that reality; it was shaped by it. It became both refuge and rehearsal - a place where many of us could exhale and practice the world we are trying to build: one where power is shared, creativity is centred, and sisterhood is strategic.

Ten years in, what feels most true is this: community is not something you inherit. It is something you cultivate - patiently, with care. When that work is done with integrity and love, it leaves its mark quietly and lastingly, on the world and on those changed by building it together.

WOW Pakistan exists because of co-curators who argued fiercely for ideas, protected artists and speakers, and trusted that feminist intervention is layered, not linear. Some stayed for years, some briefly, but all shaped the festival’s architecture and spirit.

It exists because of teams who carried invisible labour - logistics, communications, security, production - work that rarely makes it to the stage, yet determines whether space exists at all.



**“Change does not move
in straight lines.
It circles, returns, and
asks to be relearned.”**

Jude Kelly's founding vision for WOW, global in solidarity, local in leadership, allowed the festival to be rooted here while remaining connected to a wider movement. Through the WOW Foundation, the founding vision has traveled without flattening difference. That trust has mattered.

And none of this could have happened without deep partnership. In a cultural landscape shaped by precarity and short-term thinking, the British Council, particularly its Arts team in Pakistan, offered something rare: sustained belief and funding.

As conveners, co-curators, and delivery partners, they created the conditions for this work to endure, allowing focus on quality and courage rather than survival. That stability made possible a defining commitment: to keep WOW open and free in a geography where access is never neutral.

At its heart, WOW has always been its community: artists who trusted us with their creativity; speakers who told the truth even when it was risky; volunteers who gave time they could barely spare; partners who stayed present through complexity; and audiences who returned, year after year, curious and open. Community became real through practice: attentiveness and the choice to commit.

Let the coming years declare this clearly: women and girls are not the margins of Pakistan - we are its authors and architects. Sisterhood is not soft; it is infrastructure. Community is not fragile; it is our strongest muscle.

This memorial zine carries our story.

More than a chronicle, it is a mirror - of growth, persistence, and what becomes possible when vision meets trust and shared generosity. And a reminder that the work, the wild and precious work, continues.

قیادت



over 15 years, 150 festivals

رونق

a method to the movement

محفل

احساس

millions of participants inspired to take action

موقع

rooted in the arts

Reaching Out, *Inviting In*

مقصود

Fifteen years into its journey, the global WOW (Women of the World) festival has come to embody everything a festival can be - and so much more. What began as a festival at London's Southbank Centre in 2010, has since become a global movement championing gender equality globally.

*WOW's unique method is rooted in the arts - and has been proven over the course of fifteen years, **150** festivals in **71** places across **6** continents, and **millions** of participants who became inspired to take action.*

At its core, is the belief that no matter who a person is, WOW is a place for everyone who believes in gender equality.

WOW entered South Asia for the first time in May 2016 with Karachi as its debut city - the choice of location and timing could not have been more fitting, taking place against the backdrop of a widening gender gap in Pakistan.

With five more physical festivals, 2017, 2019, 2023, 2024 and 2025, one gathering in 2018 and two digital festivals in 2021 and 2022, WOW Pakistan's impact and reach has only expanded.





Despite the scale and complexity of the festival, it has remained agile, shifting and adapting to the time and context in which it operates.

Sustained programming, for instance, during the COVID-19 lockdown, by pivoting to digital platforms, resulted in the creation of a robust online archive of content from 2021 onwards, hosted across its website and YouTube channel.

During the thick of the lockdown period, the festival maintained connection and momentum by holding conversations on Instagram Live, titled 'Live with WOW Women'. This continued for three seasons and featured incredible conversations with diverse women across the country, spanning the fields from sports and politics to academia and the arts.

This initiative eventually evolved into WOW Pakistan's podcast, now known as WOWcast, available on YouTube.

Each episode offers an intimate, human look into the stories shaping our world:



from laboratories and lecture halls to design studios and digital frontiers.

These are not just interviews; they are windows into the heart of what it means to lead, question, and create with purpose.

WOWCast extends WOW's mission into the digital public sphere by amplifying women's voices and ideas beyond the festival stage. The podcast spotlights creating energetic, honest conversations that inspire, resonate, and mobilise audiences across Pakistan and beyond.

Through intimate, high-impact storytelling, WOWCast explores themes such as redefining strength beyond physical ideals, finding joy and meaning through creativity, leading with empathy in male-dominated industries, and pursuing purpose through risk, discipline, and faith.

Deeply rooted in Pakistani realities, each episode contributes to a collective narrative that challenges narrow definitions of power and makes women's stories visible, audible, and impossible to ignore.





Though staying steadfast in its global mission to champion a gender-equal world, WOW Pakistan has continually adapted itself to fit unique challenges within its local landscape.

Confronting issues like violence against women, limited access to basic healthcare and education, glass ceilings within the workplace and the climate crisis, of which women and children are some of the worst impacted victims, WOW Pakistan has responded by creating spaces for conversation, dialogue, and collective reflection to engage with the breadth and complexity of these challenges. This has driven the festival to adopt a multi-disciplinary, intersectional approach in its programming and outreach.

For WOW, inclusion is not an outcome, but a starting point. At the inception and ideation stage of every WOW event, is a process known as the WOW Think In. This is a deliberate act of listening that brings together people of all genders and diverse backgrounds to share experiences, raise questions and help shape what the festival would look like within the local context.

This ensures that programming is shaped by the very people it seeks to serve.

In addition to making sure that the festival programming remains rooted in the voices of grassroots communities, Think Ins also create opportunities to build relationships and networks.

Perhaps the most powerful consequence of the WOW Think Ins is that they bring together segments of people who may normally not interact, such as community leaders, artists, business owners, activists, students, scientists, stay at home parents and more.

WOW Pakistan has also hosted capsule events at schools and universities across cities, such as Haque Academy and DHA College for Women in Karachi and Beaconhouse and Lahore College for Women University in Lahore, inviting young women and girls to ask bold questions about the world around them - and how they would change it.

Through sustained engagement with a wide range of stakeholders over the years, WOW Pakistan has morphed into a safe and inclusive space where individuals and communities from various walks of life come together to learn, share experiences and spark meaningful discourse on gender-related challenges across the board.

Inclusivity is also at the heart of the festival's design.

Being free and publicly accessible, both in person and through live streaming across social media, it invites participation beyond physical boundaries and limitations. With a wheelchair-accessible venue and sign language interpretation, the festival actively works to ensure that access is not an afterthought, but a fundamental part of how WOW brings people together.



Over the past ten years, WOW Pakistan's impact has not been measured solely by attendance or reach, but by the moments that linger, the conversations that unsettled assumptions, the performances that opened emotional doors, and the collective experiences that redefined what safety, belonging, and leadership can look like.

Specific patterns emerge when reflecting on these moments: how art becomes a tool for reflection, how care and healing are treated as political acts, how diversity demands active facilitation rather than passive inclusion, and how indigenous and women-led knowledge systems are centred and preserved.

Taken together, these moments reveal WOW's vision of change: one where inclusion is practiced with care, creativity becomes a catalyst for courage, and communities are not just represented, but deeply empowered to lead.



8

Full
Festivals

1

Gathering

3

Cities

850

Delegates

**WOW by
Numbers**



37

Think In Events
& Capsule Events

Additional
Events

152

M

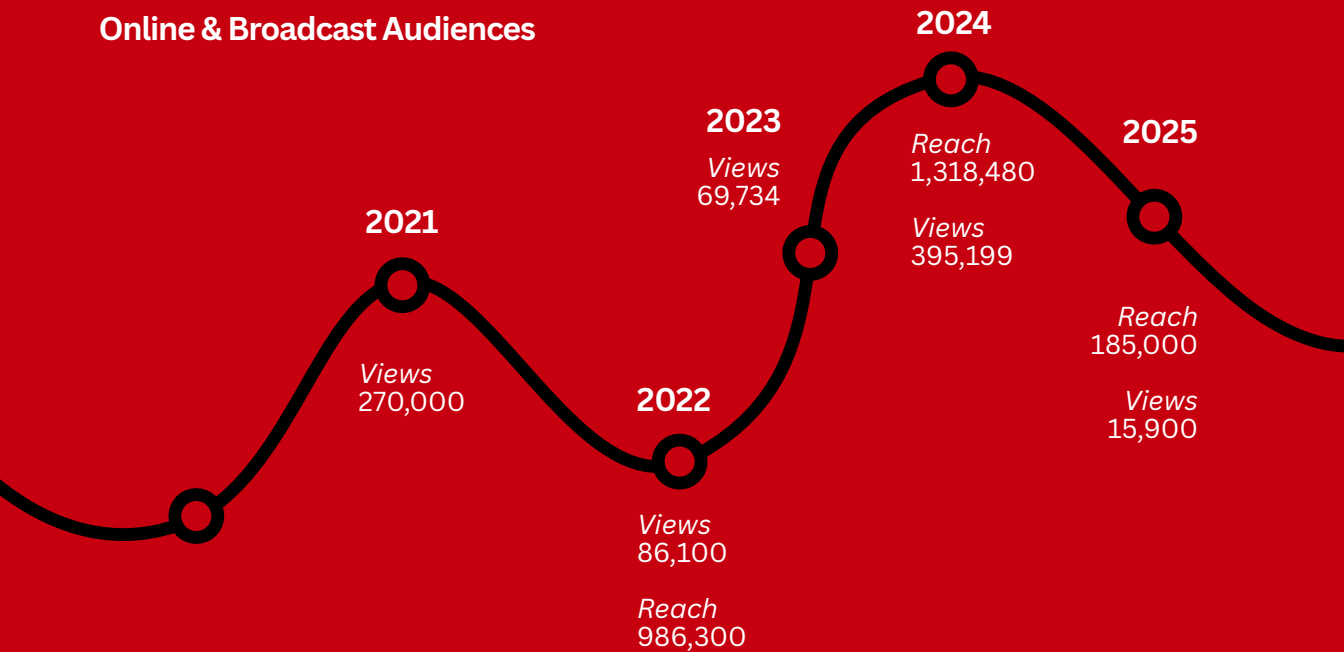
Social Media
Reach

65,000

In person
Attendees



Online & Broadcast Audiences



Ideas that shaped a decade

تصور

Ten years into its journey, WOW Pakistan has worked with nearly a thousand delegates, artists, entrepreneurs, leaders and activists, many of whom have connected and collaborated over time.

Both the platform and its participants have evolved together, growing and shaping one another over the course of a decade. WOW's commitment to building solutions by and for women is reflected in how differences are held in conversation, how ideas converge through dialogue, and how relationships are nurtured over time.

Women's challenges in Pakistan are many and varied, yet they come together - across diverse cultural identities, professional interests and marginalized spaces - to dismantle invisible and intangible barriers, both for themselves, and those to follow.



WOW engages with women's work and achievements across sectors: from breaking barriers in sports and athletics to fashion, beauty, and aesthetics; from women behind the camera to those rewriting the script - literally and metaphorically; from leaders in technology and agriculture to those driving tangible change within their communities.

By exploring the full range of women's lived experiences, WOW Pakistan aims to build a space alive with dialogue and the power to spark change.

Over the past decade, certain ideas have surfaced again and again - not by design, but by necessity. As the festival has grown, so too have the conversations, shaped by urgency, lived experience, and collective inquiry.

No single booklet could hold the full breadth of stories, interventions, and moments that have defined WOW Pakistan since its genesis. What follows, instead, is a constellation of recurring themes - ideas that have consistently informed the festival's programming, relationships, and impact.

These themes reflect what women have asked for, pushed toward, and built together. They are not fixed or exhaustive; they continue to evolve, inviting new conversations as WOW Pakistan looks ahead.



1

صبح نو

Children and Young People:

GROWING TOMORROW

From its inception, WOW Pakistan has framed imagination as a civic right by inviting children and young people to dream and debate.

Globally, WOW is guided by twelve curatorial pillars, one of which centres education as fundamental to freedom. To imagine a world without gender disparity, WOW believes critical thinking and debate must begin early, because leadership does not start in adulthood, but in curiosity.

This belief comes to life through the WOW Junior strand: interactive sessions where children explore gender roles through play, arts, storytelling, science, and reflection.

Designed to be joyful and age-appropriate, these sessions help young participants engage with big ideas in ways that feel accessible and affirming. Recent festivals have also featured communal music and storytelling, creative arts workshops, and hands-on activities that encourage reflection on identity, community, and the world around them.



Beyond playful learning, WOW Pakistan makes space for youth voices within substantive discussions.

At WOW 2023, the youth panel “Kids: Metasocialising: How We Connect Today” brought together young speakers to explore how Generation Z navigates digital spaces, addressing both the possibilities for connection and the risks of online life.

Youth-centred panels have also tackled emerging issues such as technology and AI, including “Challenging Unrealistic Standards: How AI Redefines Learning” at WOW 2025, where young leaders shared perspectives on education, careers, and the digital future

Youth participation is also grounded in civic engagement.



At WOW 2024, programming included Awaaz Do, a British Council initiative supporting youth-led action in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab to challenge gender-based violence and social exclusion.

Speakers shared concrete examples of community advocacy, including Khusbakht Aleena’s organising of a khuli kachehri to address the lack of graveyard space for minority communities, an effort that challenged gender norms around public speech and led to formal resolution.





“Shadow Friends”, a panel discussion held during WOW 2022, featured young female A-Level students.

This explored the hidden culture of aggression among girls, showing how conflict often takes subtle, indirect forms - such as gossip, exclusion, manipulation, and weaponized secrets - rather than open confrontation.

The panel not only critiqued how schools and families reinforce hidden aggression through gendered expectations, but also offered clear, solution-oriented responses. It emphasized creating supportive and inclusive institutional practices, such as equal opportunities, fair rules, and safe, female-led spaces for open dialogue.



Young people are also engaged as festival volunteers, gaining hands-on experience in event delivery, programming support, and facilitation.

High-school and university students serve as volunteers and develop skills in communication, coordination, and community outreach while amplifying youth voices within the festival.



Acting as ambassadors for inclusion and equality, they embody WOW Pakistan’s belief that leadership and civic engagement begin early and are strengthened through participation and shared responsibility.





2

Power Leadership & Passion:

WOMEN BUILDING NEW WORLDS

Sixteen years ago, Jude Kelly founded WOW because despite progress and achievements, public narratives still mainly centered on men

In many ways, the festival is a rehearsal for what a gender-equal world could look like - a space where women, girls, and non-binary people are visible, celebrated, and authoritative.

This world-building is not abstract.



Ideas are tested, embodied, and made real, shaping how power, belonging, and leadership are experienced beyond the festival.

This philosophy comes alive through remarkable global and local leaders, such as Tahira Abdullah, Sheema Kermani, Nimco Ali and Malala Yousafzai.



For many years, Senator Sherry Rehman has inaugurated WOW Pakistan with keynote addresses, situating women's leadership within civic political agency and public policy, and emphasising women's voices in shaping national futures.



WOW consistently redefines leadership by moving away from hierarchical, masculine tropes toward collaboration, empathy, and collective vision.



In 2024, “Festivals as Spaces for Change for Women” examined festivals as living examples of alternative worlds, - public, joyful, and collaborative - where culture becomes a leadership tool.

Festival founders including Ameena Saiyid, Moneeza Hashmi, Qudsia Rahim, and Syima Aslam reflected on how festivals reshape public space and storytelling, arguing that culture can be an engine for social change.



WOW Pakistan’s programming foregrounds power and leadership in everyday realities. Panels such as “Beauty: Web or Hammock” (2023) examined beauty standards as both livelihood and control, opening dialogue on autonomy and economic participation.

“Chronicling Mughal-Sikh Women: Power, Politics, and Patronage” (2024) reclaimed erased histories, revealing alternative genealogies of influence and agency, while “Closing the Digital Divide” analysed barriers to technology access - an increasingly critical site of leadership.

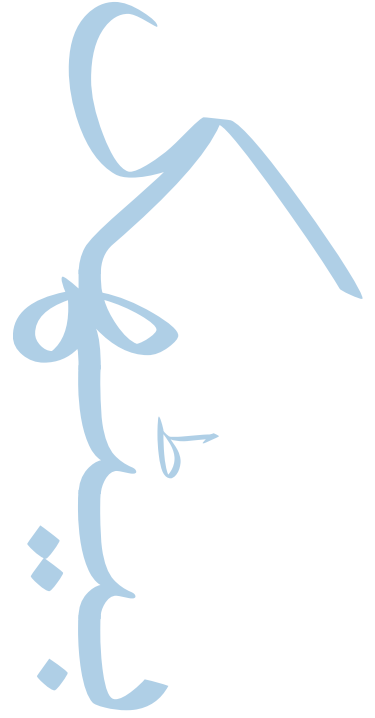


WOW also interrogates work and leadership structures themselves

A 2023 baithak, “Can Women Have It All?” discusses the concept of whether workplaces are in fact truly equal by interrogating ‘the second shift’. This is the unpaid domestic and emotional labour that women continue to do after formal working hours.

The session was facilitated by an all-women team from the Centre of Excellence for Responsible Business (CERB) and examined how workplace structures must change in order to support women across all life stages, such as caregiving and motherhood.

These conversations asked not how women can adapt to work, but how work must change to support women. In doing so, WOW helps imagine workplaces rooted in care, equity, and sustainability.





3

Community, Solidarity & Inclusion:

Everyone at the table

Community and solidarity are central to WOW's global mission, but in Pakistan they present multifaceted challenges.

In a world where Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) efforts are oftentimes empty titles, and in a society shaped by exclusionary public institutions, WOW Pakistan does more than just create inclusive spaces - it actively guides those who enter them, ensuring that interactions are substantive, rather than merely symbolic.

Accessibility has been a cornerstone of this work. Since 2017, WOW Pakistan has incorporated Pakistan Sign Language interpretation across programming, initially with Deaf Reach and later with ConnectHear, ensuring deaf and hard-of-hearing participants can fully engage.

In 2024, Braille maps and resources were introduced, supporting independent navigation for visually impaired attendees.



WOW Pakistan's inclusive ethos extends into its programming. The festival has curated arts-based and sensory-engaged experiences that welcome children with special needs and diverse learning styles.

Interactive storytelling and music sessions with artists like Khaled Anam and Vicky Zhuang Yi-Yin blend narrative, voice, and musical elements to engage children of varied abilities.

Science Fuse, Drama Mama and Sarwat Gilani's creative play and participatory activities centre imagination and embodied learning, making festival participation accessible and enjoyable for children with different needs and paces of interaction.

In 2023, an inclusive musical performance curated by Zara Madani, featured students from Ida Rieu, a school for the deaf and blind, and Afghan refugee communities, alongside mainstream musicians, creating a space where refugees and local artists shared the stage and audience.





In 2021, Maheen Gul Malik spoke about children with ‘invisible’ disabilities, discussing challenges faced by autistic and differently abled children and their families. Drawing from personal experience as a parent of an autistic child, she explained how mainstream schools and public systems often lack the expertise, flexibility, and policies needed to support neurodivergent children.

From sensory access to social interaction, WOW Pakistan approaches inclusion as a practice of coexistence. Designing accessible environments is one step; reshaping how people share space across differences, is another. Trans individuals have been offered speaking opportunities and space in the market to showcase their products, while also addressing discomfort and bias among other attendees.

WOW hosted panels in 2022 and 2023 centring Khwaja Sira activists and leaders, tracing historical erasure, colonial criminalisation, and present-day survival economies, while calling for dignity, family acceptance, and structural reform.



These panels included notable activists and community leaders such as Dr. Mehrub Moiz, Shahzadi Rai and Hina Baloch, who spoke about how historically, Khwaja Siras held visible roles in South Asian societies (including within cultural and courtly spaces), and that their marginalization escalated under British colonial rule through laws and policies that stigmatized them.

Film, *Vote For X*, was also screened at WOW to showcase the first trans person to run for office in Pakistan.

At WOW Karachi 2019, a panel titled “Minority Women on the Rise” brought women from religious and ethnic minority communities into the spotlight, centring their leadership and lived experience.

The panel featured Krishna Kumari, Safina Gill, Sayed Gul Kalash and Lynette Viccaji, each actively engaged in social advocacy and community work. This session celebrated minority women claiming spaces in culture, activism, and public life, while allowing audiences to reflect on the work still needed to support their full participation and leadership.



In WOW Pakistan 2023, the panel “Education, Community and Continuity” brought the notion of “white in our flag” into a festive dialogue about pluralism and belonging, explicitly naming the role of religious minority communities in shaping Pakistan’s cultural and educational heritage.

Framed around educationists and leaders such as Sister Julie, Shireen Mana and Ronilla Singh, the session used the metaphor of the white in the national flag to highlight how minority identities contribute to community continuity, shared history and collective education, making visible voices that are too often marginalised in public discourse.

Taken together, these practices reflect WOW Pakistan's understanding of community and solidarity as lived, relational processes — built through access and shared responsibility. This commitment extends beyond programming and accessibility measures to the festival's open-for-all, free, zero-ticketing model, ensuring that participation is not limited by socioeconomic background, communal identity, or legal status.

By removing financial and institutional barriers, WOW Pakistan has welcomed refugees, youth from underserved communities, and participants from across class and cultural divides, creating a space where diversity is not only represented but actively shared. This approach has fostered remarkably diverse attendance over the years.

For example, the 8th edition of WOW Pakistan in Lahore drew more than 12,000 people from across the city and beyond — including families, students, workers, and communities who might not ordinarily have access to large-scale cultural or civic events. In this way, the festival embodies a vision of community and solidarity that is tangible, lived, and accessible to all.





4

**Rewriting
the Rules:**
*Innovation,
Technology,
and the Future*

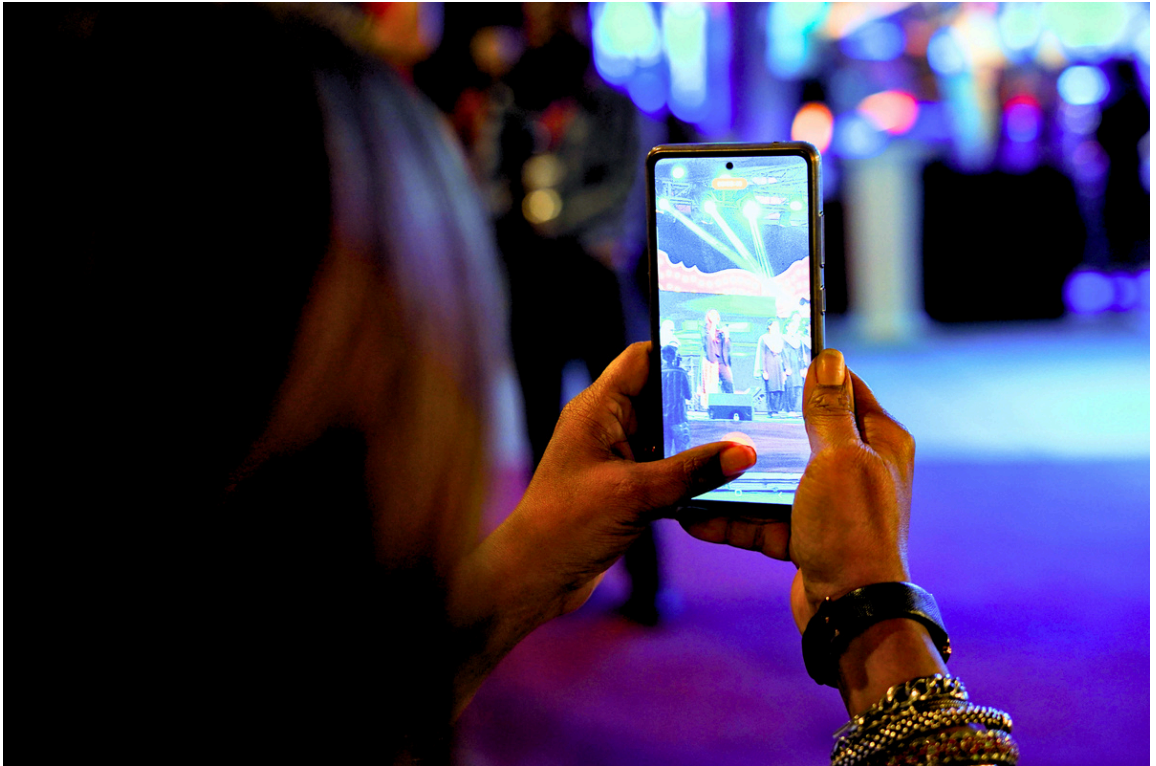
A key curatorial focus at WOW examines how technology, digital life, and innovation shape the world we live in, and who gets to define and drive these forces.

Though digital spaces have opened new avenues for work, expression, and connection - women, girls, and gender-diverse people remain underrepresented in decision-making around emerging technologies. This exclusion not only limits opportunity but embeds bias in technology design, governance and everyday digital life.

“Protecting Yourself Online”, a panel hosted at WOW 2024, outlined practical, real-world guides to digital safety. The conversation brought digital rights experts together to unpack the psychology of scams, harassment, financial fraud and other digital harms.

Hira Basit, from the Digital Rights Foundation, noted that there are over 14,000 reported cybercrime cases from 2018 to 2024; ranging from stalking, impersonation, blackmail and financial fraud.





Dr. Saiqa Imtiaz shared a chilling case where a fake “doctor” exploited breast cancer awareness groups to coerce intimate images from young women, revealing how attackers weaponize trust.

Even when institutions try to help, victims can face exhausting reporting routes as a barrier to justice. Innovation is fundamentally connected to rights and infrastructure because it is not enough for women to simply participate online; digital literacy and safer platform practices are also essential. The panel’s aim was to help participants understand risks like catfishing and impersonation, while offering practical strategies for protection and reporting in everyday online life and emphasizing the importance of digital literacy as a tool for agency.

During the festival in 2022, a panel consisting of lawyers, journalists and policy advocates examined how digital spaces can intensify gendered violence through coordinated harassment and disinformation. Journalist Asma Shirazi described how threats evolved into organised campaigns aimed at silencing women.

The discussion called for institutional reform, platform accountability, stronger documentation, and women’s inclusion in tech governance.

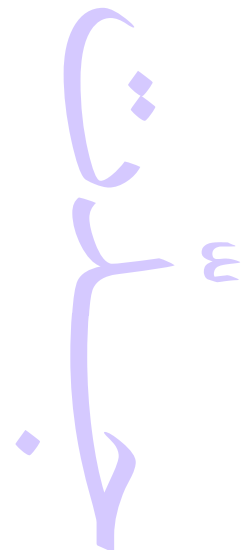
These conversations continue to evolve. In WOW Pakistan 2025, the festival presented a powerful fireside chat titled “Humanising AI for Gender Equity in South Asia”, featuring Ramma Cheema, Hera Hussain, and Mallory Knodel, leading voices in digital inclusion, feminist tech and storytelling.

This session explored how artificial intelligence can both entrench existing inequalities and be harnessed intentionally for equity - calling for demystifying AI, bridging gender gaps in development, and embedding culturally responsive design.



Beyond panels, the festival’s schedule showcases a vibrant engagement with digital literacy, innovation, and future technologies as part of its broader empowerment mission.

The “Art of Digital Literacy” panel brought together British Council Action Research Grant winners to explore women’s leadership in digital learning and innovation, underscoring the intersections of technology with education, economic empowerment, and creative practice.



WOW Pakistan aims to facilitate how feminist vision can not only make the digital space a safer space but also pushes that vision into building the future of leadership, entrepreneurship and technology.



A 2025 panel consisting of experienced women in the field such as Jehanara, Faiza Yousuf and Maria Umar, “I Dream of the Metaverse”, explored how women are innovating across industries while challenging systemic barriers and reimagining what’s possible in a rapidly evolving world.

From navigating the intersections of gender, race, and class to embracing adaptive leadership and sustainable entrepreneurship, the discussion examined how technology can in fact amplify women's voices and ideas.

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WOW Pakistan situates digital life — from online safety to AI adoption — within the broader struggle for equity, access, and agency.

By amplifying voices at the intersection of gender and technology, the festival not only diagnoses the challenges of the digital age, but also writes new stories of participation, education and future possibilities where women and marginalised communities can claim space online and in emerging landscapes of innovation.



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5

Our Bodies, Our Lives: *Safety, Belonging & Wellbeing*



Gender-based violence remains a grim reality for women and girls across the world and in Pakistan.

WOW Pakistan has addressed this from its inception - both by naming harm through dialogue and by modelling safety as lived practice: a space where women can attend, participate, and express themselves freely.



A consistent thread has been embodied empowerment. Self-defence workshops, featured since 2017, combine physical practice with awareness of threat dynamics, framing safety as both skill and consciousness. Sport and movement have also been central, positioning athletic participation as a way for women to claim strength, visibility, and public space.

Voices such as Sana Mir, former captain of the Pakistan women's cricket team, Nada Parvez, Pakistan's first bantamweight boxing champion and programmes like Women on Wheels have reframed mobility and physical presence as forms of leadership.

Together, these interventions frame sport as an extension of safety and belonging - where women do not merely protect their bodies, but actively inhabit them with confidence.



Yet WOW is clear that individual strength cannot dismantle structural violence.

This is why embodied practices are paired with explicit conversations about impunity and accountability. "Ending Impunity for Gender Based Violence" (WOW 2021) featuring Sahar Bandial, Sara Malkani and others, brought legal and activist perspectives together to expose gaps between law and justice - where reporting is discouraged and survivors blamed.

The panel called for survivor-first approaches, institutional accountability, and cultural shifts that place responsibility squarely on perpetrators.



Gendered violence in Pakistan doesn't begin or end with headline cases - it lives in the everyday policing of women's bodies.

That same control shows up in quieter, more "acceptable" forms: silence around puberty, shame around periods, restricted access to contraception and safe care, and the constant pressure to prioritise family honour over personal autonomy. "Cramping My Style" (2022) reframed menstrual health as a rights issue, challenging shame and calling for open, intergenerational conversations that centre dignity and wellbeing.

Bringing together activists and innovators Saba Khalid, Aamna Uqaili, Ayesha Amin and Tanzila Khan, stressed that bodily autonomy and belonging are not treated as optional, but fundamental.





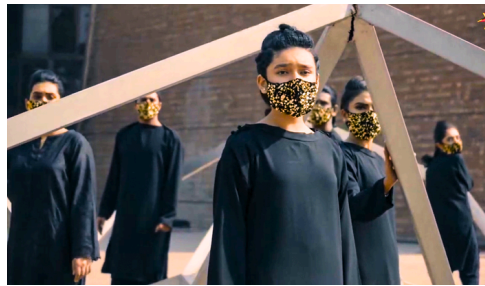
Beyond harm and health, WOW treats the body as a site of expression and meaning. Performances such as Sarah Mumtaz’s “The Not Very Lucid World of Mine” (2019) interrogated beauty standards and external validation, while dance works by Sheema Kermani, Samiya Mumtaz, Suhaee Abro, and Adnan Jahangir over the years have explored freedom, identity, and belonging.



Panels like “Drink Your Milk” (2021) and “Reimagining Beauty” (2025) extended these inquiries into dialogue, asserting bodily autonomy as the right to define, inhabit, and express oneself on one’s own terms.

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A multimedia artistic project blending animated film poems, spoken word, and critical conversation explored how society shapes, constrains, and controls women's bodies and voices, featuring Yamina Peerzada and Aamina Sheikh in 2021, and extended these questions into dialogue on body image, womanhood, and power.



In 2025, artist and body-positivity activist Baemisal led *Reimagining Beauty: From Pressure to Empowerment*, challenging narrow beauty standards, embracing body diversity, and examining the dual role of social media in limiting and liberating self-image.

Together, these interventions reframed bodily autonomy not only as protection or access to health, but as the right to define, express, and inhabit one's body on one's own terms.



6

Climate, Nature & Care: Reimagining Survival

In Pakistan, the climate crisis is not a distant threat but a daily reality, felt most sharply by women and girls whose lives are shaped by food insecurity, water scarcity, displacement, and environmental disaster.

As one of the countries most affected by climate change, Pakistan faces floods, heatwaves, and disappearing livelihoods that intensify existing inequalities and place disproportionate burdens on those already responsible for care and survival. Through this lens, WOW Pakistan understands the climate crisis as inseparable from gender inequality.



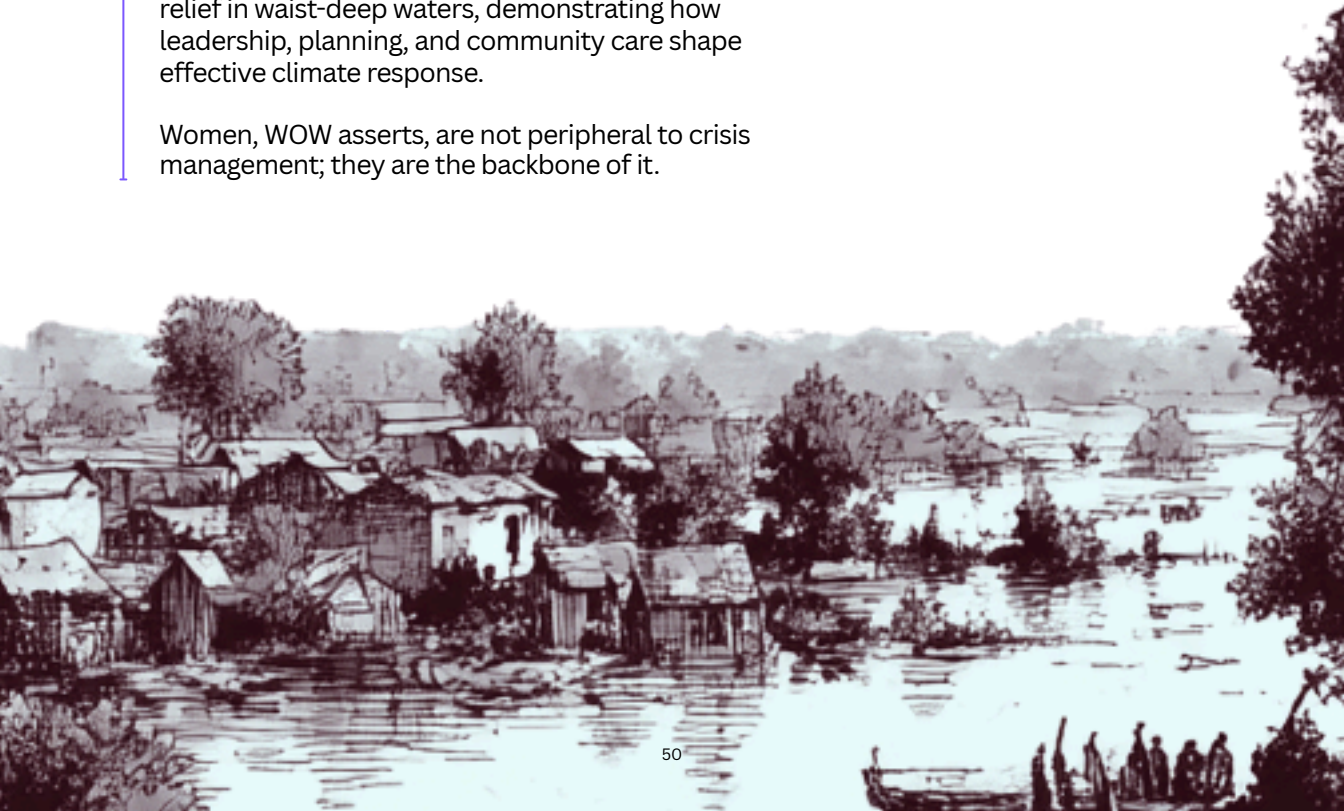
At WOW 2022, the panel “Two Fights in One” highlighted how climate change intersects with women’s everyday realities in regions such as Tharparkar.

Afia Salam underscored that while women are central to household survival, they remain largely excluded from decision-making, resulting in limited access to healthcare, clean water, and reproductive support, especially during crises.

Yet women are not only impacted by climate change; they are key drivers of resilience. At a panel, “Building Community Resilience to Climate Change” (2023), Hira Wajahat highlighted women-led adaptation initiatives, from water solutions to flood response.

Quratulain Wazir, serving as Additional Deputy Commissioner of Nowshera during the 2022 floods, shared her experience coordinating evacuations and relief in waist-deep waters, demonstrating how leadership, planning, and community care shape effective climate response.

Women, WOW asserts, are not peripheral to crisis management; they are the backbone of it.



WOW Pakistan has also foregrounded women as custodians of nature and holders of ecological knowledge.

Panels such as “Beyond Nature’s Housekeepers” (2024) examined women’s roles as seed savers, biodiversity guardians, and stewards of land, even as their leadership remains under-recognised. In 2025, WWF-Pakistan’s *baithak* “SHEROs of the Wild” spotlighted women wildlife rangers and conservation leaders working on the frontlines of biodiversity protection - challenging stereotypes and expanding the imagination of who belongs in environmental leadership.

The session brought together trailblazing women who have defied traditional career boundaries to protect endangered species and manage habitats, playing critical roles in safeguarding ecosystems and inspiring future generations.



At WOW Pakistan, art and storytelling have been central to making climate realities legible and human.

“Sometimes Even the Shore Drowns,” a climate film presented at WOW 2025, explored environmental loss, displacement, and community resilience, demonstrating how cultural expression can make the scale and emotional weight of the climate crisis more human and shared.

WOW Pakistan’s climate work has consistently drawn on indigenous and craft-based knowledge systems that centre women as custodians of land, biodiversity, and sustainable living. Films such as “Supun Xik: The Last of the Wakhi Shepherdess” foregrounded women’s ecological expertise, while conversations around craft, slow fashion, and reuse further reframed climate care as everyday labour - embedded in women’s lives and passed across generations.

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WOW’s commitment to climate care also extends to how the festival is designed and implemented. Since 2019, waste at WOW events has been segregated and responsibly managed through recycling and composting, with surplus food redirected through partners such as Robin Hood Army and Rizq.

Sustainability partners including Garbage Can, Trashit, and Iverde have supported waste management and environmental awareness across editions.





Marketplace vendors are encouraged to minimise single-use plastics, while delegate tote bags are produced using factory excess and deadstock fabrics through partnerships with local brands.

Where non-recyclable materials are unavoidable, they are donated for reuse or upcycling through flood-relief partners and crafts organisations.

Delegate tote bags over the past two years have been produced through partnership with Generation, a local highstreet brand, using factory excess and deadstock fabrics, reducing textile waste while supporting mindful production.

In 2025, WOW Pakistan further strengthened its environmental commitments through a plantation partnership with Life at Lahore, aimed at offsetting the festivals carbon footprint.

The initiative focused on planting native tree species suited to Lahore's ecosystem.

WOW among other partners with the logistical support of Life at Lahore planted 10,000 trees with 65% of the activity led by youth volunteers.



Attention to sustainability also extends to the smallest details of the festival experience. In place of single-use plastic name badges, WOW will introduce in 2026 plastic-free, upcycled fabric tags made from textile scraps.

Designed as brooch-style passes, these tags can later be reused as bookmarks or keepsakes - small objects intended to carry memory and meaning beyond the event.



Across editions, WOW Pakistan positions climate not as an isolated crisis to be feared, but as a collective challenge that intersects with gender, care, and justice.



By centring women's leadership, indigenous knowledge, and sustainable design, the festival reframes survival not as endurance alone, but as collective creativity, responsibility, and the possibility of regenerative futures.

7

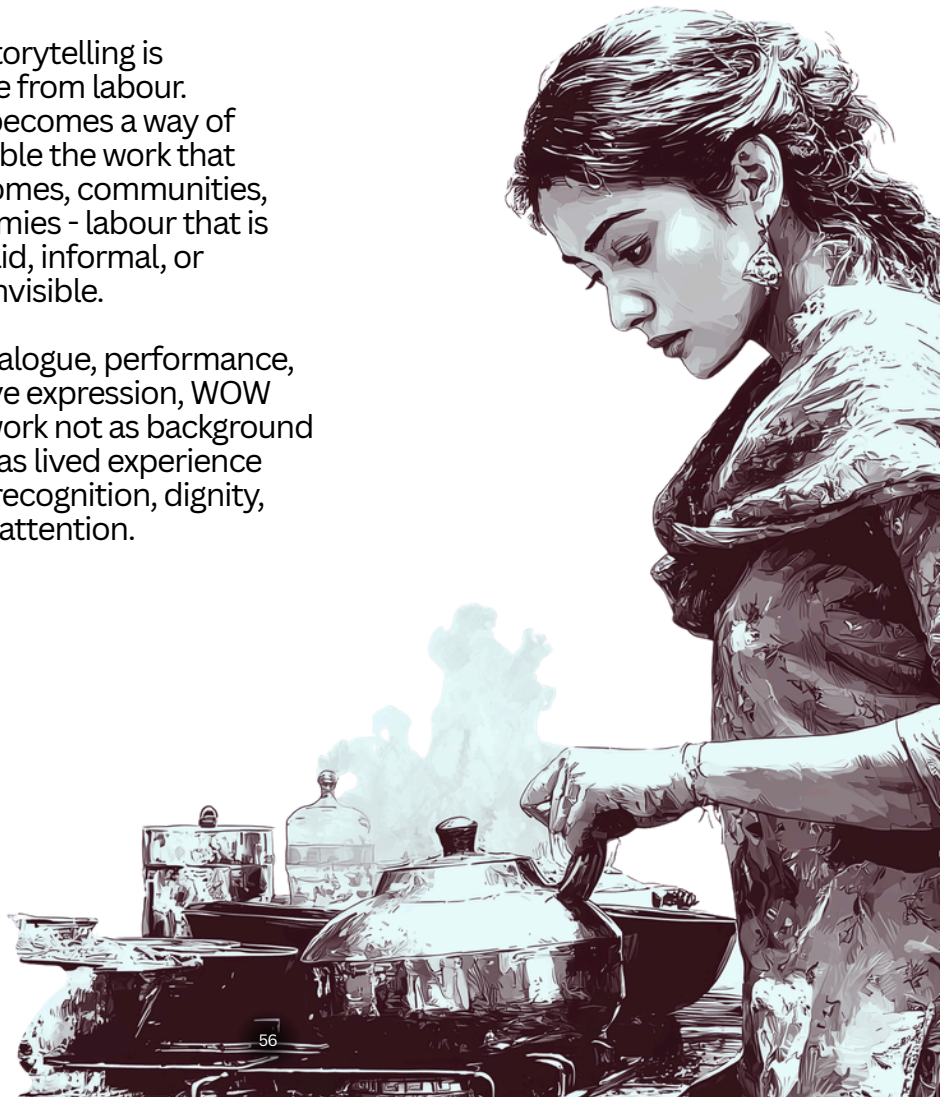
Work, Worth and Voice: Owning Our Stories

WOW champions diverse voices shaping its vision of the world across media, politics, art, and beyond. Creating space for people to tell their own stories matters - not as visibility alone, but as authorship.

Equity and agency are not achieved by inclusion in someone else's narrative, but by placing women at the centre of shaping their own.

At WOW, storytelling is inseparable from labour. Narrative becomes a way of making visible the work that sustains homes, communities, and economies - labour that is often unpaid, informal, or rendered invisible.

Through dialogue, performance, and creative expression, WOW reframes work not as background effort, but as lived experience deserving recognition, dignity, and policy attention.



Home should be a space of care, pride and equality – yet unpaid domestic work still falls disproportionately on women.

In 2024, WOW Pakistan showcased the global campaign by UNFPA aimed at highlighting the economic gaps created when women’s unpaid care work is excluded from formal accounting systems - from household work to caregiving.

The discussion linked everyday domestic labour to global policy debates, underscoring that recognising care work is essential to closing gender gaps in economic participation.

The Punjabi play “Chog Kusambey Di” exposed the realities faced by women at the lowest rungs of the labour hierarchy. Performed in a language accessible to affected communities, the play transformed structural injustice into collective recognition - inviting audiences to imagine change.



At WOW Pakistan 2024, the “Women’s Friendships, Capitalism, Care” *baithak* expanded the definition of labour beyond wages and workplaces.

Through readings of women’s writing and collective reflection, the session mapped how emotional, interpersonal, and intellectual labour circulates within friendships and community networks.

By foregrounding relational work as deeply political, the *baithak* made visible the labour embedded in social bonds – work that sustains movements, caregiving systems, and collective survival, yet is rarely acknowledged or valued.





The relationship between narrative, labour, and representation was further examined through a 2024 panel titled “Can Corporates Create Social Change?” featuring Nighat Dad, Sammar Sultan, Mariyam Nawaz and Nausheen Ahmad.

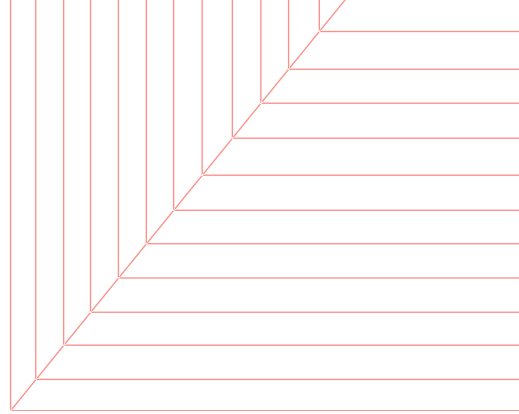
This session explored how media, branding, and advertising increasingly shape public perceptions of women’s work and family life. It analysed portrayals of women’s work, shared care, and evolving household structures - linking cultural narratives directly to how labour is valued and redistributed.

Traditional craft and fashion have been consistently foregrounded as skilled, economic labour, which has been historically undervalued. In 2025, WOW launched a year-long British Council-funded research project on sustainable fashion, exploring Pakistan’s textile heritage and ethical futures.

Workshops on reuse and redesign explore this further, alongside earlier panels such as “Catalysing Fashion Change” (2021), which brought together international and Pakistani voices including Clare Press, Sudebi Thakurata, Kendall Robbins, and Noorjehan Bilgrami to discuss ethical fashion, storytelling, and cultural authenticity.



A follow-up panel, “Slow Fashion in a Fast World” (2022), featuring Khadija Rehman and Safia Minney continued this dialogue, positioning women’s craft and textile labour as central to sustainable economies - not marginal or informal work, but skilled enterprise deserving recognition, visibility, and value.



WOW pairs visibility with practical pathways to income. Workshops on starting a freelance career and sessions on low-capital entrepreneurship equip women with tools to enter digital and local economies.

Creative labour has also been amplified through film and performance, including documentaries on women in the arts and the WOW Marketplace, which brings women-led businesses into visible public space.

In 2025, a documentary by Destination Media premiered at WOW, celebrating artistic work and cultural production that is often undervalued or rendered invisible.

Alongside this, the WOW Marketplace has functioned as a recurring site of economic visibility - showcasing women-led small businesses, artisans, and home-based enterprises and creating opportunities for business connections and sales

By bringing informal and creative labour into a visible, shared marketplace, WOW blurs the line between labour and narrative presence, allowing women's economic contributions to be witnessed, valued, and celebrated.



Networking & Collaboration: Circles that Strengthen

Community-building is a core pillar of WOW's ethos. In Pakistan, women navigate not only entrenched patriarchal systems that restrict access and safety, but also divisions within their own communities, where these norms are often internalised and reproduced.

WOW responds by intentionally creating spaces for connection, where women can move beyond silos, recognise shared struggles, and build circles of trust and solidarity that strengthen both individual agency and collective action.



Beyond dialogue, WOW Pakistan actively fosters intersectoral networking by bringing together delegates from diverse sectors - arts, media, policy, business, and activism - in a single space where professionals meet, exchange ideas, and explore collaboration.

For many participants, WOW is one of the few public forums where they encounter so many other women, and where intergenerational, cross-sector bonds can form. These connections extend beyond the festival, seeding mentorship, partnerships, and collective projects that strengthen Pakistan's women-led ecosystems.



WOW's spaces have enabled relationships that ripple outward. As early as 2016, the WOW Marketplace became more than a site of exchange - it functioned as a meeting ground where like-minded women connected, shared concerns, and discussed collective action in the public sphere. This spirit of collective presence was also reflected in initiatives at the festival such as Behenchara: Girls at Dhabas, where women reclaimed the traditional roadside tea stalls, largely male-dominated spaces.

People cleaned, set up, shared tea, and occupied space collectively, demonstrating how a community formed through shared presence can challenge gendered norms without spectacle.

These acts echoed WOW's ethos: that change does not always begin with slogans, but with women sitting together, being seen, and refusing isolation.

The *baithak* itself, literally meaning “sitting together”, is a unique format born out of WOW Pakistan’s commitment to grounding global feminist conversations in local ways of gathering, listening, and learning. Developed in response to the limits of hierarchical panel formats, the *baithak* centres collective conversation.

Not an expert on stage, a silent audience, and knowledge flowing in only one direction. In a society where many women are already discouraged from speaking openly, this structure can reinforce exclusion rather than challenge it.

Rooted in South Asian traditions of informal, communal dialogue, the *baithak* reimagines how conversations take place. Audiences are not passive recipients but active contributors, shaping the discussion through questions, reflections, and shared stories.

At its core, the *baithak* is an act of decolonising traditional programming - moving away from rigid formats and toward modes of exchange that feel culturally authentic, accessible, and relational.



Connection at WOW extends beyond dialogue into care and healing. Recognising exhaustion and burnout as political realities, the festival has made space for collective wellbeing through sessions such as laughter therapy, meditation, and self-defence.

These practices assert care not as private retreat, but as shared resistance. WOW Pakistan also speaks directly to cultural narratives that can fragment women’s solidarity.

In 2024, sessions such as “Aurat Hi Aurat Ki Dost Hai” and “Aurat, Aurat Ki Dushman?” challenged tropes of female rivalry, exploring friendship as a feminist practice. The 2024 theme *sakhiyan* (female friends) celebrated women’s bonds as sources of strength, creativity, and survival.



Across all these formats, WOW Pakistan demonstrates that networking and collaboration are not just professional exercises, but lived, embodied, and culturally grounded experiences.



By intentionally designing spaces that combine dialogue, mentorship, creativity, and play, WOW cultivates interpersonal and intersectoral bonds, ensuring that women leave the festival with connections, solidarity, and actionable support: a tangible reinforcement of the idea that together, women are stronger.

Speed-mentoring has become one of WOW Pakistan’s most consistently impactful interventions, valued for both its structure and its outcomes.

Designed to facilitate focused, reciprocal exchange, the format enables mentees to engage with mentors in a short, intensive timeframe, allowing them to test ideas, seek guidance, and reflect on challenges from multiple professional perspectives.

Delivered both within the festival and through targeted engagements with schools, colleges, and universities, speed-mentoring has proven particularly effective in career- and future-oriented contexts.

By bringing together mid- to late-career women from diverse sectors with mentees ranging from school-aged participants to early-career professionals, the programme intentionally disrupts hierarchical models of mentorship.

Instead, it creates a collaborative, intergenerational space where experience, aspiration, and curiosity intersect.



9

Culture and Creativity: Art as Advocacy

In Pakistan, culture is not merely a reflection of society; it is one of its most contested terrains.

Art, music, poetry, performance, and storytelling have long been spaces where women negotiate visibility and survival, and where direct dissent is constrained.

At WOW Pakistan, creativity is not decorative. It is strategy: a means to question norms, reclaim narratives, and imagine alternatives to inequality.



“Imagining a Future for Women in the Pakistani Music Ecosystem”, a WOW Bite from 2021, reflects on how creativity itself becomes an act of resistance in a deeply gendered cultural industry.

Drawing from her experience as a musician, curator, and ethnomusicologist, Natasha Noorani highlights how Pakistan’s music ecosystem, shaped by limited infrastructure, commercial gatekeeping, and unsafe public spaces, has historically marginalised women beyond narrowly defined roles as singers. Women are now increasingly claiming space as producers, instrumentalists, curators, and cultural leaders.

The talk framed music as advocacy, reshaping who creates culture, how it is made, and whose voices define the nation’s soundscape.



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Live performance has been central to this reclamation. At WOW Karachi 2017, Hadiqa Kiani performed as did other artists including Sheema Kermani and Humera Channa.

In 2019, Abida Parveen's performance at WOW made a legendary qawwal accessible to those who couldn't afford commercial tickets.

People came from far and wide, filling halls and gardens to capacity, for a powerful, soulful performance that felt deeply collective.

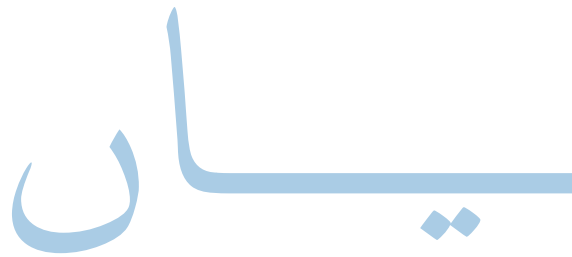
Performances and concert series celebrating women across genres, asserted joy, pleasure, and visibility as political acts. At WOW Pakistan 2025, “Chaurangi: Four Directions of Love” brought women qawwals into a devotional tradition historically closed to them - an act of feminist sonic activism that insisted on women’s presence in sacred cultural space.

Contemporary political critique has also found expression through music and performance at WOW. At WOW Pakistan 2024, the Sindhi rap duo Panjhi Gang delivered a live performance that fused poetic resistance with musical activism, addressing issues such as honour killings, enforced disappearances and police brutality.



One of WOW Pakistan’s most enduring contributions has been its intentional use of art as a tool for reflection, critique, and social dialogue - rather than positioning culture solely as entertainment.

A striking example is *Dhaar* (2019), a dance performance by Samiya Mumtaz and Adnan Jahangir that explored the societal imposition of “dual lives” on women, one for family and respectability, another for selfhood and survival. Similarly, *Heer: A Retelling* (2019) reimagined a canonical love story from Heer’s perspective, reclaiming narrative agency within folklore that has historically centered on male desire.



Visual and digital art also played a role in confronting global crises through a local lens. ‘The Measure of All Change’, by BAFTA-winning artist Dan Hett (2019), transformed abstract climate data into an emotionally resonant visual experience, making the urgency of the climate emergency both visible and palpable.

Films such as *Rebel Optimist* (about activist Perveen Rahman) and *Zahida* (about Pakistan’s first female taxi driver) further reinforced WOW’s commitment to storytelling as a political act - restoring women to public memory, where they have often been erased.



WOW has also consistently centred indigenous knowledge, craft, and women's cultural labour. Panels such as "The Future of Traditional Craft" (2019) highlighted artisans and designers working at the intersection of heritage and contemporary practice, reframing craft as living knowledge tied to livelihoods and sustainability.

Baithaks and performances celebrating linguistic and regional plurality reinforced the value of knowledge carried through women - often orally, informally, and across generations.

By valuing these forms of knowledge, WOW positions archiving as an urgent feminist act - preserving women's contributions, and ensuring future generations inherit stories of agency, care, and leadership.

Across these moments, WOW Pakistan demonstrates that art at the festival is not ornamental but instrumental. Creativity functions as advocacy, memory, resistance, and possibility - a means through which complex social realities are processed, shared, and collectively understood.

10

Voice & Visibility: Speaking, Claiming and Leading



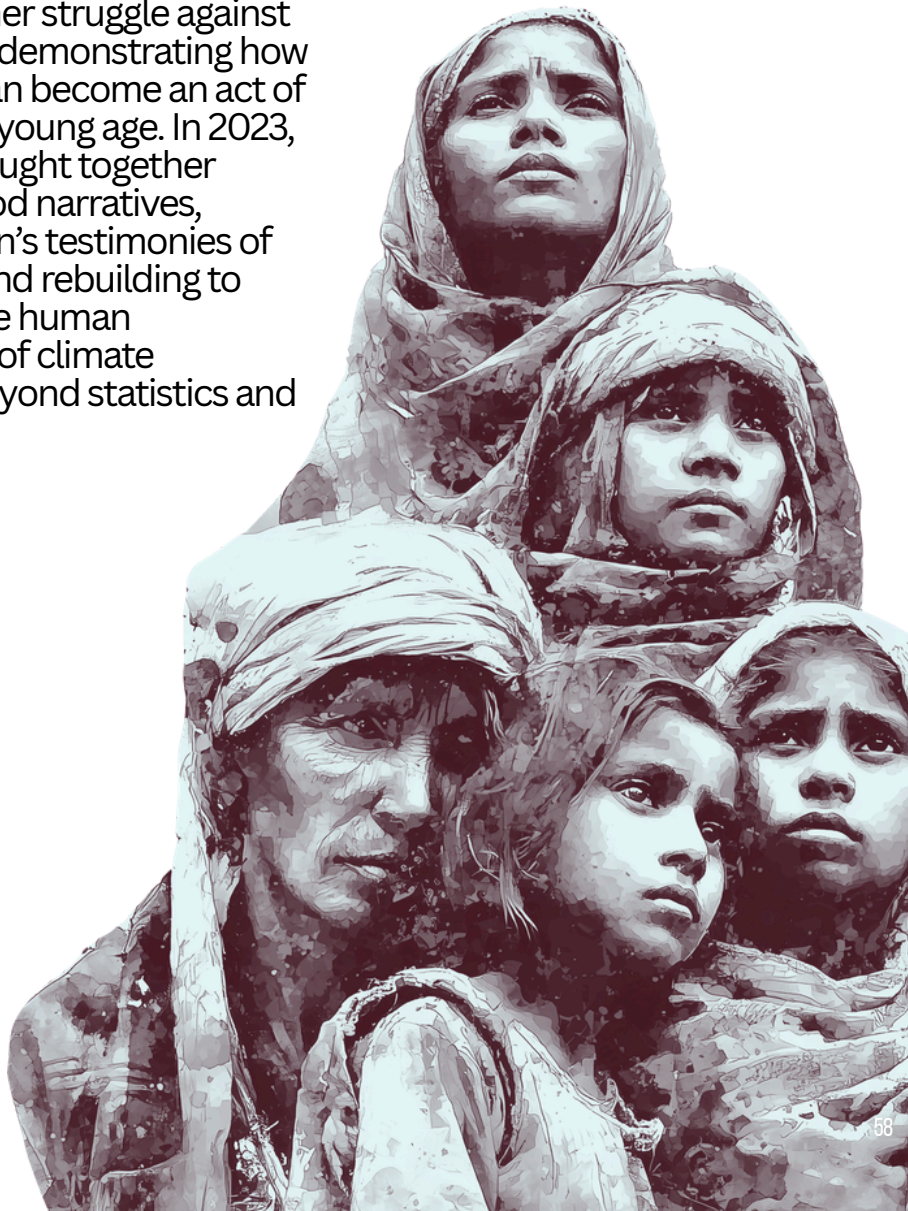
*At the heart of WOW
Pakistan is the insistence
that voice is power—and
that visibility is not vanity,
but necessity.*

In contexts where women are socialised into silence, speaking publicly becomes an act of courage, leadership, and resistance. WOW creates conditions where women are not only invited to speak but trusted as experts of their own lives.

WOW Pakistan has consistently positioned women's voices at the heart of the public imagination.

The festival has amplified grassroots activism and lived experience, from youth-led advocacy to collective storytelling.

In 2022, young activist Hadiqa Bashir shared her struggle against child marriage, demonstrating how speaking out can become an act of leadership at a young age. In 2023, "Aab Beeti" brought together interwoven flood narratives, centring women's testimonies of loss, survival, and rebuilding to make visible the human consequences of climate catastrophe beyond statistics and headlines.



These sit alongside civic and policy-oriented conversations that foreground women's leadership across sectors.

WOW Pakistan has convened delegates and speakers such as public policy analyst Gulalai Khan, inclusion advocate Sabahat Khurram Bokhari, and social entrepreneur Roshaneh Zafar.

Together, these voices bridge grassroots transformation, corporate inclusion, and policy discourse - shaping how gender equity, representation, and leadership are debated in the public sphere.





Feminist dialogues have also consistently foregrounded women's leadership in shaping development narratives from within the Global South, with a focus on South Asia. Across festivals, these conversations have emphasized visibility not only as presence, but as influence over policy, knowledge, and practice.

The opening panel of 2021 reinforced the importance of Pakistani women's voices in redefining development priorities and challenging extractive or externally driven models. This emphasis echoed earlier feminist interventions led by Khawar Mumtaz and Farida Shaheed, whose scholarship and activism have been foundational in advancing women's rights, legal reform, and gender-responsive development in Pakistan and the region.

Earlier milestones include the 2016 opening panel, featuring Nighat Said Khan, a pioneering feminist thinker and co-founder of the Women's Action Forum, whose work helped articulate women's autonomy and agency as central to democratic and development processes.

These threads continued in 2019 through the panel "Women's Empowerment & Sustainable Development", moderated by Domino Pateman, with Yasmin Lari, Ayesha Tammy Haq, Moneeza Ahmed, and Fatima Majeed. The discussion highlighted women-led approaches to sustainability, policy engagement, and social change, reinforcing the value of cross-sector and cross-regional perspectives.

At WOW, women in media have lent not just their celebrity but their voices and presence to the cause. Anoushey Ashraf, Mira Sethi, Sania Saeed, Zara Tareen and Aamina Sheikh have anchored the event, shaping its tone and flow, while Mahira Khan, Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy and others took the stage to speak.

Their roles highlight how women on television and in media can move beyond visibility to active participation - facilitating conversations, sharing perspectives and strengthening dialogue around women's representation and influence in the public sphere.



Individual stories of courage and advocacy further exemplify how voice becomes leadership.

At WOW 2025, Khadija Siddiqi appeared in a WOW Bites session, recounting her survival of a life-threatening attack and her pursuit of justice through Pakistan’s courts. By transforming personal trauma into sustained legal advocacy, her story embodied voice as resistance and leadership – challenging impunity and inspiring systemic change.



Similarly, mountaineer Anum Ozair has been featured as a young sportswoman advocating for women’s visibility and participation in spaces traditionally closed to them, expanding notions of leadership beyond formal politics.

Regional and linguistic representation has also been central to WOW Pakistan’s approach to visibility. At WOW 2024, “The Whispering Mountains” brought together musicians from Gilgit-Baltistan performing in indigenous languages including Burushaski, Shina, Khowar, and Wakhi.



By centring cultural voices often marginalised in national narratives, the performance functioned as an act of recognition – asserting that leadership and belonging are inseparable from linguistic and regional identity.

Collectively, these strands reflect WOW Pakistan’s commitment to speaking, claiming, and leading. Whether through testimony, art, policy dialogue, or performance, the festival creates platforms where women and girls narrate their own realities, occupy public space with authority, and shape Pakistan’s cultural and civic futures.

In doing so, WOW affirms that voice is not merely expression – it is a foundation for leadership and lasting social change.

Makers, Markets & Other Acts of Creativity



The WOW Marketplace sits at the heart of the festival: a shared, high-energy space designed for browsing, conversation, and connection.

Carefully curated and fully managed by the festival team, it brings together products, food, activities, and information in an environment aligned with WOW's values of access, dignity, and visibility.



Visually vibrant and constantly in motion, the marketplace showcases handmade crafts, artisanal goods, and locally produced food.

From textiles to furniture, each item carries the imprint of women-led creativity and labour. Just as importantly, visitors encounter the makers themselves - entrepreneurs who share stories of navigating barriers, challenging stereotypes, and building livelihoods within male-dominated systems.

Here, exchange is never only transactional; it is relational and an opportunity for connection, solidarity, and mutual support.

The marketplace is organised into three interconnected areas. The Product and Retail Section features women-run or women-led microenterprises, social enterprises, and small businesses, alongside a select number of more established brands.

Care is taken to ensure diversity of offerings, from artisanal and handmade goods to everyday consumer products, while avoiding duplication, encouraging collaboration rather than competition.

The Food Court provides a platform for small-scale vendors, experimental initiatives, and mainstream enterprises, highlighting culinary diversity and allowing both emerging and established women entrepreneurs to engage directly with audiences.

The Information Kiosks are staffed by organisations working across women's rights, education, health, disability, sports, and non-traditional professions, offering resources, advocacy, and awareness on a wide range of social issues.



A strong emphasis is placed on women-led participation, with particular priority given to small-scale and microenterprise vendors who may otherwise lack access to commercial or mainstream platforms.

This intentional approach results in a diverse ecosystem, bringing together start-ups, local artisans, social enterprises, and larger businesses within a shared space. The mix enables cross-learning, informal mentorship, and peer networking, fostering a sense of collective growth rather than competition.

By integrating commerce, information, and community into a single inclusive environment, the WOW Marketplace becomes far more than a marketplace. It functions as a hub for empowerment, learning, and collaboration, where women-led initiatives gain visibility, audiences engage directly with ideas and stories, and networks of support are strengthened.

Crucially, the space also serves as a site of advocacy and activism.

Amid the hum of conversation and exchange, information kiosks spark dialogue around gender equality, women's rights, and social justice, offering resources on issues ranging from reproductive health to financial literacy.

In doing so, the marketplace empowers attendees not only to support women-led work, but to imagine, and actively participate in, more equitable futures.



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Moments *that moved us*

Some moments are the heartbeat of WOW Pakistan—instances where care, trust, and intentionality create belonging.

Listening to Nazo Pirzada speak about raising a differently-abled adopted child, dancing alongside children with special needs, shooting at targets with Afghan refugee girls seeing the sea for the first time, or watching older women quilt alongside young children—all of these moments capture the power of space made with intention.





There is so much to be cherished and remembered, but the stories that follow offer a glimpse into how WOW transforms presence into possibility, and connection into lasting change.



Laughter as a Bridge: *When Inhibition Gave Way to Joy*

One deeply moving moment at WOW unfolded during a laughter therapy session designed simply for relaxation, release, and collective joy.

Participants were invited to lie back on the ground, letting go of self-consciousness and routine, and allowing laughter to take its natural course.

Among the participants was a gentleman who appeared, at first, hesitant - even cautious.



Before the session began, he sought reassurance that the activity was not exclusively for women.

His question carried the weight of familiar social boundaries, particularly around mixed-gender spaces and expressions of vulnerability. Initially, he participated with restraint, visibly observing the atmosphere and, perhaps, the involvement of women around him - including his wife, who was watching as a bystander at the time.

Yet within minutes, something shifted. As the shared laughter softened the space and dissolved inhibition, the same gentleman stood up, reached out, and gently pulled his wife into the circle. What followed was a moment of unguarded joy. Together, they laughed freely, visibly relaxed, and fully present - no longer bound by hesitation or self-consciousness.

That moment captured a subtle but profound truth: when spaces are intentionally designed with care, even deeply ingrained social reservations can give way to genuine human connection unrestricted by norms or cultural expectations.



Inclusive by Design: *When Accessibility Created Belonging*



In 2024, WOW continued to broaden the definition of inclusion through a masterclass conducted by makeup artist Falak Amaar. Most of the audience comprised women from the hearing-impaired community. Throughout the session, sign-language interpretation ensured that the experience was accessible, thoughtful, and welcoming.

During the formal Q&A, the room remained quiet, and it appeared as though few questions would be asked. But inclusion often reveals itself in quieter ways.

After the session concluded, participants sought Falak with the help of an interpreter. What followed was a flurry of questions, conversation, and excitement. The women shared their curiosity, their enthusiasm, and their gratitude — expressing how meaningful it was to be part of a space where they did not feel unheard but fully considered.

For many, it was not just the content of the masterclass that mattered, but the recognition that WOW had intentionally created a space where sign language was not an afterthought, but a bridge.



The Ida Rieu Performance: *Being Seen, Being Heard*

At WOW Pakistan 2023, students from the Ida Rieu School for the Blind, led by Zara Madani, performed as part of the festival's programming.

Among them was Anamta, a young woman navigating life as a visually impaired student and the eldest of five siblings, whose father, a driver, had tragically died in a terror attack. Through her performance, Anamta not only showcased her talent but also found a platform to be seen and heard.

Shortly after the festival, she was offered voiceover work, marking a transformative step in her personal and professional journey, a testament to how WOW Pakistan creates opportunities, amplifies marginalized voices, and enables young people to translate visibility into real-world impact.



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Jamila Baloch: *When Leadership is Finally Recognised*

Jamila Baloch's journey with WOW Pakistan is rooted in leadership and the transformative power of public visibility.

Through a not-for-profit economic empowerment initiative, Jamila had been able to earn independently through her handwork and, crucially, to channel work to other women by securing and distributing orders. This, however, was not celebrated. Jamila faced social backlash for stepping into public life and for educating her daughters - actions that challenged deeply entrenched norms around women's roles and autonomy. Some people in the community maligned her, questioning her morality.

When Jamila was invited to lead a communal quilting activity at WOW, she chose to make her leadership visible on her own terms. She arrived at the festival with her family and extended an invitation to her same community, asking them to witness her work - among women, families, and audiences from across Karachi.

What unfolded at the festival became a moment of reckoning. A male leader watched Jamila own the space with confidence, train others, and speak with authority. He saw women from different backgrounds approach her with respect, seek her expertise, and work alongside her as equals. He listened to the conversations taking place across the festival and returned the following day to witness more.

At the close of the festival, he told Jamila that he had encountered a world he did not know existed - one where women could move freely, lead openly, and be treated with dignity beyond the confines of the home. Jamila later described this moment as the happiest day of her life.



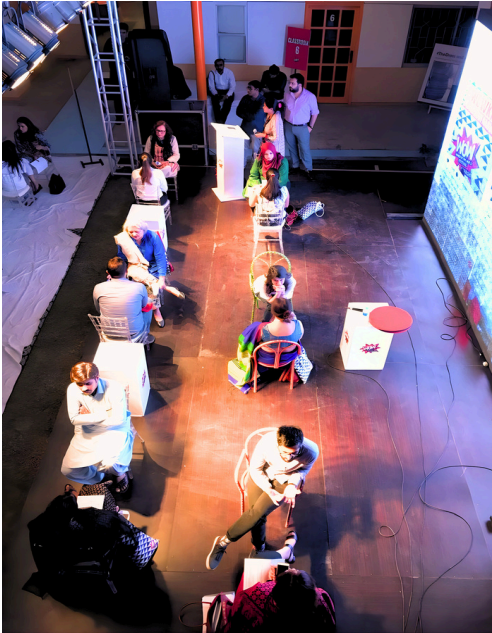
Whoopie Town: *When Play Becomes Advocacy*

Whoopie Town is an interactive board game developed by Tanzila Khan and featured at WOW Pakistan 2024.



Positioned on the Central Lawn as a participatory festival activity, the game was designed to educate players about disability inclusion — particularly how inclusive practices shape workplaces, markets, and public spaces.

Using gamification, Whoopie Town translated complex ideas about economic and social inclusion into everyday language, inviting players of all ages and backgrounds to navigate scenarios that reveal the barriers faced by persons with disabilities and the choices that can promote equity.



For many participants, the experience was both fun and quietly confronting.

As they moved through the game, players were prompted to recognise how easily they take their own ability to navigate space and geography for granted – without the constant calculations required of people with disabilities. What began as play became an eye-opening exercise, prompting reflection, empathy, and conversation.

By embedding this experience within the festival's public flow, WOW Pakistan transformed learning into action, making the often-invisible challenges of inclusion visible, relatable, and shareable – not only for those directly affected, but also for allies and the broader community.

Partners in Possibility

WOW is made possible through partnerships with collaborators and allies who believe in the power of culture to shift narratives and expand opportunity. Our partners are not simply supporters, but co-architects of a shared vision - enabling platforms where women's voices are amplified, difficult conversations are held, and new futures are imagined.

Through sustained alliances, trust, and shared values, these partnerships help ensure that WOW remains accessible, inclusive, and impactful, extending its reach across communities while staying rooted in feminist principles.

ACADEMIC PARTNERS



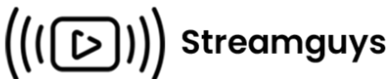
COLLABORATING PARTNERS



CURATING PARTNERS



FESTIVAL PARTNERS





Behind the Curtain

Behind every WOW Pakistan festival and moment of connection is a small, committed team - changing over the years, yet united by care, creativity, and conviction. Producers, curators, strategists, communicators, and community-builders came together at different moments, each contributing to the shape and spirit of WOW through their time and labour.

More than organisers, they have been cultural workers and custodians of the WOW ethos in Pakistan - holding space for joy and dissent, care and critique, imagination and action. It is this collective, evolving labour that allowed WOW to exist not only as an event, but as a living, growing platform.

With deep gratitude to everyone who carried WOW, for a season or a decade: your care and contribution made all of this possible.

BEHIND THE CURTAIN



Aabida Ali



Abeer Chohan



Ahsan Abbas Alavi



Amneh Shaikh-Farooqui



Atiya Abbas



Bareera Rofi



Chantal Harrison-Lee



Dana MacLeod



Dr. Muhammad Ali



Durriya Kazi



Faiza Mushtaq



Farhat Fatima



Fatima Mullick



Fozia Tahir



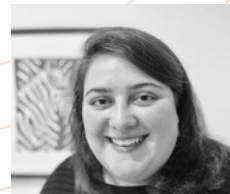
Gulnaz Anjum



Haider Ali Khan



Javeria Younes



Jill Richens



Kanwal Khoosat



Khadija Bano



Khurram Shah



Khadija Hussaini



Laila Jamil



Laila Premjee



Maheen Siddiqui



Maheen Zia



Michael Saleem



Nairah Khan



Nida Zaman



Noorulain Masood



Raabia Qadir



Raania Durrani



Rabia Garib



Rahma Mian



Saima Zaidi



Sara Nisar



Sitwat Arshad



Sumbul Khan



Talea Zafar



Talha Mufti



Waqar Shaikh



Zeenia Shaukat

The Road *Ahead*

Looking back on the path WOW Pakistan set out on ten years ago, and reflecting on where the festival stands today, it is clear that the journey has led to unexpected, and deeply rewarding, destinations.

Though the future cannot be predicted, uncertainty has become familiar terrain, navigated with intention rather than fear.



What carries forward with certainty are the values that have shaped WOW Pakistan since its inception.

In reflecting on this work, it is tempting to imagine the festival as a person: one skilled in listening, in holding space, in asking difficult questions, and in offering just enough provocation to open new ways of thinking.

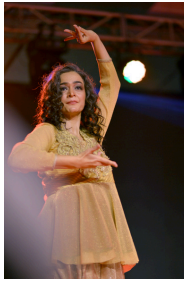
These principles - care, curiosity, courage, and collaboration - form the foundation of WOW Pakistan's practice.

As long as they remain central to its mission, the festival is equipped to meet the challenges of an ever-changing world.



WOW Pakistan is guided by a deep belief in the country's extraordinary capacity for creativity and leadership—particularly among young people, who make up nearly two-thirds of the population.







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Across regions, disciplines, and communities, women and girls are continually redefining what ambition, achievement, and possibility look like. WOW Pakistan remains committed to seeking out these stories, learning from lived experience, and creating platforms where curiosity, talent, and courage can be recognised and nurtured.

To deepen this work, WOW Pakistan is expanding its outreach through partnerships with educational institutions, corporate partners and community organisations, creating meaningful opportunities to engage with young women and girls beyond the festival stage.

These relationships allow WOW not only to showcase role models, but to listen - to understand the questions being asked, the futures being imagined, and the change this generation is ready to lead.

As part of this evolution, WOW Pakistan is moving beyond a single annual festival through smaller, more focused capsule events held throughout the year.

These sustained engagements carry the spirit of WOW into everyday spaces, enabling ongoing dialogue, creativity, and collective action.

Alongside this, WOW Pakistan’s digital presence has continued to grow across social media and online platforms. These spaces have expanded the reach of WOW’s conversations, allowing voices to be amplified and communities to connect across geographies.

With this increased visibility comes increased responsibility. WOW Pakistan is committed to using its digital platforms to elevate underrepresented voices and to shape online spaces that reflect care, equity, and gender justice within public discourse.

WOW Pakistan does not operate in isolation; with the collaboration of the WOW Foundation and the support of the British Council, it is embedded within a global network of festivals and facilitators.

As festivals across regions - particularly those working within similar social, political, and cultural contexts - enter into dialogue with one another, opportunities for shared learning deepen. Ideas travel, strategies adapt, and solidarities form across borders, reminding us that while struggles are local, many of the questions women face are shared - and that collective strength often exists beyond national boundaries.



In a world shaped by rapid change, economic uncertainty, geopolitical shifts, and technological transformation, new challenges will inevitably emerge. The question is less what those challenges will be, and more how we choose to meet them.



WOW Pakistan approaches the future with openness, committed to learning, adapting, and responding collectively.

The road ahead may be unknown, but the festival team walks it alongside the community built over the past decade.

This shared journey - rooted in trust, care, and long-term relationships - has always been WOW Pakistan's quiet strength, and remains its greatest gift.



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 **WOW**
Pakistan