

Case Study

Center for Arts-based Methodologies and Wellbeing (CFAW)

A deep dive into the journey, organisational structure, service model, and population supported by CFAW, with reflections on its impact and key lessons learnt



CFAW

City Karachi

District Sindh

Country Pakistan

Region South Asia



“Our mission is to create a safe community space that supports the holistic wellbeing of communities and the environment through participatory and arts-based methodologies.”



Organisational profile

Team size Small (11-50 people)

Age of organisation 6-10 years



Key aspects of our work

Primary contextual issue General population

Life stage All

Gender focus All

Level of intervention Prevention & promotion

Annual Reach 980+ people

Contextual issue

CFAW addresses the **lack of accessible mental health services and limited investment in the arts in a context where people have few safe spaces for expression, healing, and collective processing of trauma and psychosocial distress.** This gap affects all age groups differently but remains deeply interconnected.

Children often struggle to understand and express emotions due to limited language and tools for emotional awareness, which can impact confidence, relationships, and overall wellbeing from an early age. **Young people (18-25), despite growing awareness of mental health, still face stigma and social barriers that discourage open conversations and help-seeking.** Older adults often experience social isolation and may avoid discussing emotions due to cultural norms, leaving their experiences unsupported and unseen within their communities.

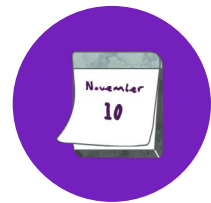
Across these groups, **there is a strong need for safe, culturally relevant, and locally meaningful spaces for emotional expression.** Many existing mental health interventions remain clinical, urban-centered, and disconnected from lived cultural realities, making them inaccessible to many communities. **This highlights a deeper gap: the absence of approaches rooted in indigenous and local healing traditions.** As a result, practices such as storytelling, poetry, music, movement, and collective artistic expression are increasingly undervalued in mainstream wellbeing frameworks and community support systems.

Objectives

CFAW’s mission is to create safe, inclusive community spaces that support mental health and wellbeing through participatory arts-based methodologies, addressing the **lack of accessible and culturally relevant avenues for emotional expression and psychosocial support.**

CFAW helps children build emotional awareness through creative tools and structured arts-based activities that support self-expression. For youth, it creates safe, non-judgmental spaces to explore emotions, reduce stigma, and encourage connection, resilience, and help-seeking. For older adults, it offers culturally sensitive environments that promote reflection, dialogue, and social connection.

Through its Wellbeing Hub and community space, **CFAW provides arts-based mental health services, workshops, performances, and community events that encourage healing and collective dialogue.** It also strengthens the wider ecosystem by **training practitioners, generating research and evidence, and expanding access through outreach and advocacy**—supporting prevention, care, recovery, and the revival of locally rooted healing practices.



WHEN?

When was the organisation established?

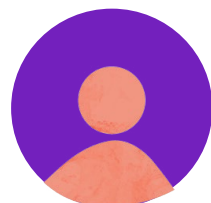
CFAW began programmatic activities in May 2020 under PHC Global and was formally established as an independent organisation on March 29, 2024.



WHY?

Why did the organisation start its activities?

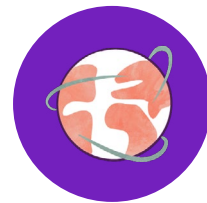
CFAW was created to address unmet mental health needs by providing accessible, arts-based, culturally rooted spaces for emotional expression, healing, and community connection across all age groups.



WHO?

Who started the organisation?

CFAW was initiated by Dr. Imran, Dr. Noshad Ali, and Dr. Habib Asfar in 2020, combining public health and arts-based practice to create accessible, community-centered mental health support.



WHERE?

Where did the organisation start implementing its activities?

CFAW began its work in Karachi, Pakistan, gradually expanding its activities to Sukkur, Bannu, Lakki Marwat, Islamabad, and Lahore, while extending its reach internationally through engagements in Sri Lanka, Singapore, and the USA.



WHAT?

What did the organisation do in its initial stages?

In its early stages, CFAW delivered psychosocial support programmes, frontline health worker training, and arts-based community projects that used storytelling, creative expression, and dialogue to support wellbeing.



HOW?

How was the organisation's work started?

CFAW began during COVID-19 through psychosocial support initiatives, with early resources secured through grants, donor partnerships, government collaborations, and a small team supporting community-based arts programmes.

Organisational structure

CFAW is led by the Chairperson (who is also part of the board of directors) who provides strategic oversight, ensures alignment with the organisation's mission, and manages external partnerships, program growth, and institutional accountability.

The Chairperson is supported by a senior management team (Rutaba Syed- Organisational Head / and Narjis Khan Operations head) including leads of programs, finance, human resources, wellbeing services, research, and community engagement who collectively guide planning, implementation, financial stewardship, and quality assurance across CFAW's three main work streams:

- Wellbeing
- Community Spaces
- Research & Interventions.

Financial management

CFAW maintains a strong financial management system grounded in transparency, accountability, and international nonprofit best practices, aligned with accounting principles, donor compliance requirements, and annual audit standards. **The organisation follows structured budgeting, financial reporting, and audit processes** to ensure accurate tracking and responsible use of funds.

Internal controls include written financial policies, dual signatories on payments, segregation of duties, and restricted access to financial records, along with secure storage of financial data. **Regular internal reviews and annual external audits** ensure compliance and financial integrity.

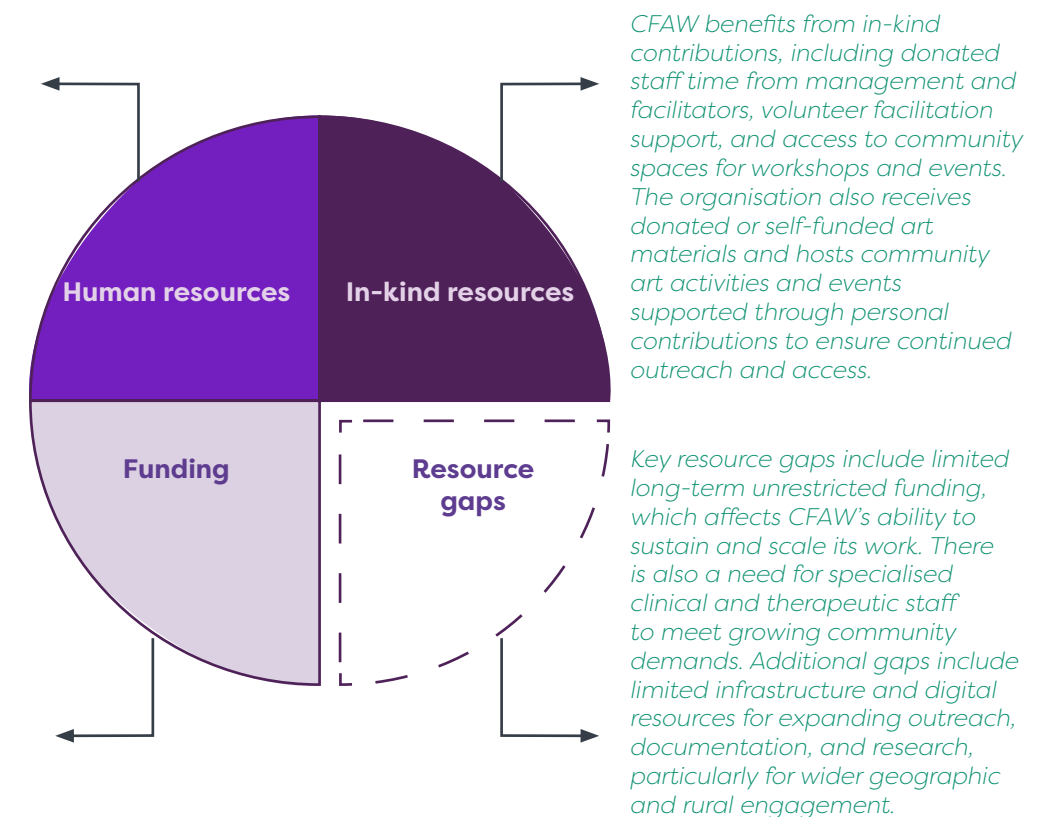
CFAW undertakes annual and project-based budgeting, supported by periodic forecasting and expenditure tracking to align resources with programme priorities. Most activities are funded through grants, with budgets embedded within each project design.

Operational planning includes a small allocation for staff wellbeing. Income from community-based, low-cost, ticketed activities at CFAW's community space (Nani Ghar) is reinvested to support smaller programmes and utilities, ensuring sustainability and access.

Resources

CFAW has a core team of 13 paid staff, including programme, facilitation, operations, research, marketing, and governance roles such as manager/facilitator, art therapist, creative associates, and wellbeing advisor. The team is supported by interns and works across programme delivery, research, and organisational development.

CFAW currently operates with an annual budget of approximately GBP 84,000, primarily supported through internal resources, project-based funding from the parent organisation, and income generated through trainings, curriculum sales, and space rentals. To sustainably scale its programmes and operations, the organisation's desired annual budget is GBP 98,000.



Model & activities

Target population

CFAW works with diverse communities across urban and rural contexts in Pakistan, including children, young people (18–25), and older adults experiencing psychosocial distress, emotional challenges, and limited access to mental health support. The organisation prioritises individuals and communities with limited access to safe, affordable, and culturally relevant wellbeing services.

Many participants face emotional suppression due to stigma, limited emotional literacy, anxiety, isolation, and stress linked to socio-economic pressures and life transitions. Children often need support in developing emotional awareness and expression, while young people navigate identity, stigma, and mental health awareness. Older adults frequently experience loneliness, reduced social connection, and limited opportunities for emotional expression.

CFAW also engages educators, artists, and community practitioners who strengthen local wellbeing ecosystems through arts-based and culturally rooted approaches to healing and psychosocial support. Through these engagements, CFAW bridges community needs with accessible, creative, and culturally grounded mental health support systems.



Services or interventions



CFAW delivers an arts-based mental health and psychosocial support model that integrates creative expression with community wellbeing. Its approach is grounded in the belief that healing is collective, culturally rooted, and best supported through accessible, non-clinical spaces that draw on local artistic and healing traditions.

Arts-based workshops, community wellbeing sessions, creative circles, performances, and reflective group spaces That support emotional expression, self-awareness, and social connection.

These are adapted for children, young people, and older adults using storytelling, movement, visual arts, music, and dialogue.

CFAW's Wellbeing Hub

CFAW's Wellbeing Hub serves as a central space for delivery, combining therapeutic arts programming with community events that encourage dialogue, reflection, and shared learning.

Alongside direct interventions, CFAW engages and trains practitioners, artists, and facilitators to strengthen community capacity for arts-based wellbeing approaches.

This integrated model creates accessible, culturally relevant pathways to emotional wellbeing and psychosocial support rooted in local knowledge and collective healing practices.

Impact

Key desired outcomes



Improved psychosocial wellbeing, emotional expression, and reduced distress among children, young people, and older adults through sustained access to culturally rooted, arts-based mental health interventions.



Increased emotional awareness, resilience, and help-seeking behaviours among participants through structured arts-based workshops, creative circles, and community wellbeing sessions.



Strengthened community capacity for arts-based psychosocial support through trained practitioners, facilitators, and expanded access to culturally relevant wellbeing spaces and practices.

Methods

CFAW uses a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative data to understand participant experiences and programme impact.

- **Quantitative data is collected through pre- and post-session feedback tools,** attendance records, and basic wellbeing indicators embedded in workshop evaluations.
- **Qualitative data is gathered through participant reflections,** facilitator observations, group discussions, and creative outputs.
- **Data is reviewed on an ongoing and quarterly basis to track progress and inform programme adaptation.** Findings are analysed thematically and descriptively to support learning, evaluation, and continuous improvement.

Information systems

CFAW uses a combination of digital and paper-based information systems to collect and manage programme data.

Digital tools include KoboToolbox and Google Forms, used by facilitators and programme staff to capture pre- and post-session feedback, attendance, and participant reflections. In offline or low-connectivity settings, paper-based forms are used and later digitised.

Data is stored in secure shared drives managed by the research and operations teams. These systems are user-friendly, cost-effective, and allow flexible data collection across diverse contexts. However, limitations include inconsistent connectivity in some field locations and reliance on manual data entry for paper-based responses, which can delay real-time analysis and reporting.

Reflections on impact so far

Since its establishment, CFAW has created safe, inclusive spaces for emotional expression and wellbeing through arts-based interventions across diverse communities in Pakistan. Participants **have shown increasing willingness to engage in their wellbeing and have gradually broken taboos and stereotypes around mental health. Many individuals who were initially hesitant have become consistently engaged,** including a widow and single mother who now regularly participate, report improved wellbeing, and prioritise self-care.

CFAW has observed **growing acceptance of arts-based methods** within communities and has **expanded outreach to diverse groups,** including individuals from conservative backgrounds. While engagement has increased, **broader community awareness and participation still need strengthening** to reach more people.

At the same time, there remains scepticism among some stakeholders regarding the effectiveness and long-term value of arts-based approaches. **CFAW continues to address this through practice-based evidence, community engagement, and expanding visibility of its work and impact over time.**

Learnings

Strengths or drivers

CFAW's key strengths include its culturally rooted, arts-based approach that makes mental health support accessible and reduces stigma through familiar creative practices. Its inclusive model reaches children, youth, and older adults across diverse and conservative communities.

Strong interdisciplinary teams, flexible community-based delivery, and continuous learning from participant feedback enhance effectiveness. Growing community trust and increasing acceptance of arts-based wellbeing methods further strengthen engagement, participation, and overall impact across CFAW's programmes.

Limitations

CFAW's work is limited by restricted long-term and unrestricted funding, affecting programme continuity, team growth, and strategic planning. There is also a shortage of specialised arts-based methodology experts and clinical mental health capacity to address more complex needs.

Monitoring and evaluation systems are still evolving, limiting long-term impact tracking and analysis. In addition, scepticism around arts-based approaches among some stakeholders can affect wider acceptance, partnerships, and institutional support for the work.

Challenges

A key challenge for CFAW is responding to the growing demand for accessible mental health and wellbeing support with limited financial and human resources. Expanding outreach to underserved and conservative communities requires sustained trust-building and engagement.

Additionally, scepticism regarding the effectiveness and long-term value of arts-based approaches can limit institutional recognition, partnerships, and sustainable funding opportunities needed to expand and sustain the organisation's work.

Opportunities

There is growing recognition of mental health, wellbeing, and community-based healing in Pakistan, creating opportunities for CFAW to expand its arts-based model and influence wider wellbeing practices. Increasing interest in culturally relevant, non-clinical approaches also creates opportunities for stronger partnerships with educational institutions, community organisations, and mental health networks. Investment in research, digital systems, and capacity building could further strengthen outreach, evaluation, and long-term sustainability.



Partnership Journey with Ember

Initial assessment

The health check assessment highlighted a number of core strengths that position CFAW as a distinctive and values-driven organisation, while also identifying priority areas for targeted support through collaboration with Ember. CFAW's strongest asset is its clear and intentional focus on arts-based methodologies, working at the intersection of the arts, mental health and wellbeing, community weaving, cultural engagement and preservation, as well as research and capacity building. This integrated approach gives CFAW a unique identity and relevance within both creative and wellbeing ecosystems.

- CFAW demonstrate a well-articulated and documented vision of itself as a horizontal learning institute that blends scientific inquiry with creative practice. This vision clearly communicates the value of the arts for mental health while aiming to make artistic practices more accessible. Importantly, the vision is not aspirational alone; it is reflected in CFAW's operating model and translated into coherent strategies and work plans.
- CFAW also benefits from a balanced organisational structure with defined roles and responsibilities. The presence of a board of directors provides governance and oversight, while recent team growth reflects responsiveness to increasing demand and expanding areas of work.
- In addition, CFAW has laid strong foundations in storytelling and impact communication. The organisation actively uses multiple platforms—including its website, social media, and newsletters—to share its work and amplify its voice. While monitoring and evaluation practices are currently more project-based, there is a clear baseline upon which more systematic impact measurement can be built. CFAW has also taken meaningful steps to embed wellbeing and safeguarding practices, particularly in relation to protecting artists and collaborators, reinforcing its ethical approach.
- Looking ahead, CFAW aims to expand its geographic reach to other parts of Pakistan and deepen its focus on research. The organisation is also exploring income generation opportunities by packaging and offering its services to other organisations, supporting both sustainability and scale.
- Despite these strengths, the assessment identified several challenges that present opportunities for strategic support. One key area is model articulation and storytelling. While individual programmes and workstreams are well defined, CFAW found it challenging to communicate its organisational model as a cohesive whole. Support in putting together the different elements into a compelling overarching narrative would strengthen external understanding and positioning.
- Fundraising is another critical area for development. CFAW would benefit from a more robust and long-term fundraising strategy that prioritises sustainable and diversified income streams, reducing reliance on short-term grants and project-based funding. Linked to this is an interest in stronger financial planning over the medium to long term.
- Networking also emerged as a challenge. A strong focus on project delivery has limited the team's capacity to cultivate relationships and expand networks, particularly with partners, funders, and potential clients aligned with CFAW's mission and values. As a result, there is a perception that the organisation is not consistently reaching its intended audiences



Key achievements

Ember worked with CFAW on a number of areas, including Model, storytelling, networking and wellbeing. Initially, the team found it challenging to clearly articulate their model. Because CFAW operates in social and political contexts that are constantly evolving, its model is intentionally flexible, allowing it to adapt to changing conditions. While the model includes a set of core activities, the team continues to refine and adjust its approach to address contextual challenges and ensure that community members are able to participate meaningfully. Ember supported CFAW in documenting the model and communicating it more effectively. CFAW now communicates its work more clearly and confidently to funders, partners, and communities.

- Ember also supported the CFAW team to review and finalise their branding and digital identity, further strengthening their ability to communicate their message.
- Additionally, Ember supported CFAW to strengthen its networking and external visibility by facilitating key connections and opportunities. Ember connected CFAW with the MHIN Asia Network, which interviewed the team and highlighted their work on its website. Ember facilitated and sponsored CFAW's participation in the Marmalade Festival in Oxford. The team networked and co-led an interactive participatory session around the use of arts-based methodologies in mental health. Following the presentation, CFAW was able to connect with a range of mental health initiatives participating in the event.
- Finally, Ember is providing leadership coaching and support focused on prioritisation and managing financial anxiety. The team highlighted how much they value Ember's openness, active listening, and supportive approach to well-being. They noted that this created a safe space to openly discuss well-being challenges, enabling them to begin working through these issues with the support of coaching.
- The partnership has helped CFAW build greater strategic confidence, coherence, and visibility. With Ember's support, the organisation has strengthened its ability to articulate its model, impact, and vision, while enhancing its storytelling, expanding its networks, and exploring more sustainable income streams. Leadership coaching also played an important role in supporting wellbeing and prioritisation during a period of financial pressure, enabling the team to operate with greater clarity and resilience.
- Looking ahead, CFAW aims to build on these foundations by strengthening its systems for capturing impact and learning, refining its value proposition and fundraising pitch, and further developing sustainable income generation strategies to support organisational growth and sustainability.

