Special Talent Exchange Program (STEP)

Progress Report

2025 - 2026



Established in 1997 by Persons with Disabilities

www.step.org.pk

1. Executive Summary

During the period covered by the exported Facebook data, the Special Talent Exchange Program (STEP) demonstrated sustained engagement in disability rights advocacy, inclusive education, accessible services, gender-based violence (GBV) response, assistive technology, employment and livelihood opportunities, organizational partnerships, leadership development and public awareness. The activity record shows STEP working with government departments, UN agencies, universities, development partners, organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs), civil society and private-sector institutions.

A major strand of activity focused on disability-inclusive GBV systems. STEP and partners supported research, focus group discussions, technical advisory processes, capacity-building training and accessibility/referral initiatives in Sindh and Balochistan. The 16 Days of Activism campaign further amplified the issue of technology-facilitated gender-based violence against women and girls with disabilities and promoted safer, more accessible digital environments.

The reporting period also reflected strong emphasis on inclusive higher education and learning. Through the Learning for All initiative and collaboration with NUST, Coventry University, Manchester Metropolitan University and the British Council, STEP contributed to training, awareness and institutional efforts such as the Equal Access Hub. Technology and innovation remained prominent, including the NOOR AI/Equal Access initiatives and their recognition through the Zero Project Award.

STEP also advanced economic and social inclusion through an MoU with HBL Microfinance Bank, assistive technology awareness and the Digital AT Social Media Contest, freelancing training opportunities for young persons with disabilities, internship/job opportunity dissemination, and leadership development through the Leadership Conference of Persons with Disabilities. National policy advocacy and visibility were further strengthened through senior-level engagements and recognition of STEP leadership.

2. Scope and Methodology

This report presents a consolidated overview of the key activities, initiatives, events, partnerships, advocacy efforts, awareness campaigns, and programmatic engagements implemented by the **Special Talent Exchange Program (STEP), Islamabad, during the period from 6 October 2025 to 6 October 2026**.

- The report focuses on substantive programmatic activities, events, partnerships, advocacy actions, awareness initiatives, and organizational engagements undertaken by STEP during the reporting period.
- Repeated activities, related engagements, and multiple communications concerning the same initiative have been consolidated where appropriate to provide a clear and non-duplicative account of STEP's work.

- Activities have been organized and presented according to their nature and relevance, highlighting key interventions, events, collaborations, campaigns, and initiatives undertaken during the year.
- The report aims to provide a concise and representative overview of STEP's work and contributions during the reporting period, with emphasis on disability inclusion, advocacy, awareness, capacity building, communication, partnerships, and community engagement.
- Descriptions of activities and their outcomes are based on the available information and documentation relating to STEP's activities during the reporting period. No unsupported figures, achievements, or outcomes have been added.
- The report should therefore be treated as a Facebook-based activity progress report, not as a complete institutional or financial annual report.

3. Detailed Activity Progress

Activity 1: Disability Rights Advocacy and Media Engagement

Activity Date / Period: November 2025

Location / Scope: PTV Home / Pakistan

Progress: STEP's Project Director, Ms. Abia Akram, participated in a PTV Home programme to highlight STEP's vision and work on disability rights, inclusive legislation, accessibility, and the promotion of an equitable and inclusive society.

Outputs / Impact:

- Increased public awareness of disability rights and inclusion.
- Strengthened advocacy for inclusive laws, accessibility, and policy reform.
- Enhanced visibility of disability-related issues in mainstream media.

Activity 2: NOOR AI and Zero Project Recognition

Activity Date / Period: 5 November 2025 and 20 February 2026

Location / Scope: International / Vienna

Progress: STEP advanced and promoted NOOR AI, an AI-based accessibility chatbot/mobile application designed to support persons with disabilities. The initiative received recognition through the Zero Project Award, with Ms. Abia Akram accepting the award on behalf of STEP in Vienna. The recognition represented STEP's continued contribution to technology-driven accessibility and inclusion.

Outputs / Impact:

- Received international recognition for STEP's technology-for-inclusion work.
- Increased visibility of AI-enabled accessibility solutions.
- Strengthened STEP's profile in global disability innovation and inclusion.

Activity 3: Equal Access Hub at NUST

Activity Date / Period: 5 November 2025

Location / Scope: NUST University, Islamabad

Progress: STEP collaborated with NUST University to establish the Equal Access Hub, aimed at providing dedicated support to students with disabilities and improving accessibility and participation in higher education.

Outputs / Impact:

- Strengthened disability-inclusive higher education.
- Promoted institutional accessibility and student support.
- Established a platform for addressing barriers faced by students with disabilities.

Activity 4: Learning for All – Disability Inclusion in Higher Education

Activity Date / Period: 21–24 November 2025

Location / Scope: NUST University, Islamabad

Progress: Under the Learning for All project, STEP collaborated with NUST, Coventry University and Manchester Metropolitan University, with support from the British Council GGP. A seminar and week-long student training addressed rights-based disability inclusion, accessibility, respect, acceptance, and lived experiences of persons with disabilities. International and local experts contributed to the learning activities.

Outputs / Impact:

- Increased awareness of disability inclusion among students and educators.
- Strengthened understanding of accessibility and lived disability experiences.
- Promoted rights-based approaches to inclusive higher education.

Activity 5: 16 Days of Activism – Technology-Facilitated GBV

Activity Date / Period: 25 November–10 December 2025

Location / Scope: Pakistan / Digital Campaign

Progress: STEP implemented awareness activities as part of the 16 Days of Activism campaign, highlighting technology-facilitated gender-based violence and the particular risks faced by women and girls with disabilities. The campaign emphasized safe digital spaces, reporting mechanisms, inclusive services, and protection.

Outputs / Impact:

- Increased awareness of technology-facilitated gender-based violence.
- Highlighted the specific protection needs of women and girls with disabilities.
- Promoted safer and more inclusive digital environments.

Activity 6: FGD on GBV Services, Disability Inclusion and Referral Pathways

Activity Date / Period: 20 November 2025

Location / Scope: DEPD, Gulshan-e-Shahbaz, Jamshoro, Sindh

Progress: STEP conducted a focus group discussion as part of its research on GBV services, disability inclusion, and referral pathways, with support from UNFPA. DEPD facilitated the activity and provided the venue, while consultants working across targeted districts of Sindh participated in the discussion.

Outputs / Impact:

- Generated field-level evidence on disability-inclusive GBV services.
- Obtained stakeholder input on referral mechanisms.
- Contributed to improving inclusive and accessible GBV response systems.

Activity 7: Disability Accessibility Assessment & GBV Referral Mechanisms – Sindh and Balochistan

Activity Date / Period: 5 January 2026

Location / Scope: Sindh and Balochistan

Progress: STEP, in collaboration with UNFPA, supported technical and launch activities focused on disability accessibility assessment and referral pathways for GBV services. In Sindh, the Technical Advisory Committee reviewed accessibility and service gaps across health, police, justice, and social support services. In Balochistan, STEP and UNFPA, in collaboration with the Social Welfare & Human Rights Department, launched the initiative in Quetta with participation from government, UN, OPD, and service-provider representatives.

Outputs / Impact:

- Strengthened coordination among relevant sectors and stakeholders.
- Identified accessibility and service gaps.
- Advanced disability-inclusive and survivor-centred GBV referral mechanisms.

Activity 8: Kar Yaqeen Psychosocial Helpline

Activity Date / Period: 14–15 January 2026

Location / Scope: Pakistan

Progress: STEP promoted and supported awareness of Kar Yaqeen, a free psychosocial helpline specifically designed to support women with disabilities experiencing gender-based violence, harassment, or emotional distress. The helpline provides confidential support, guidance, and referrals.

Outputs / Impact:

- Increased awareness of accessible psychosocial support.
- Promoted confidential assistance and referral services.
- Addressed the specific support needs of women with disabilities experiencing violence or distress.

Activity 9: Financial Inclusion Partnership with HBL Microfinance Bank

Activity Date / Period: 10 February 2026

Location / Scope: Pakistan

Progress: STEP entered into a partnership with HBL Microfinance Bank to strengthen financial inclusion and create livelihood opportunities for persons with disabilities while promoting more disability-inclusive banking services.

Outputs / Impact:

- Strengthened private-sector engagement on disability inclusion.
- Promoted financial inclusion and economic participation.
- Created opportunities for improved access to livelihood and financial services.

Activity 10: Zero Project Award – Resilience / Equal Access Technology

Activity Date / Period: 20 February 2026

Location / Scope: Vienna / International

Progress: STEP received international recognition for its resilience and technology-based inclusion initiatives, including the NOOR AI chatbot and Equal Access mobile application. The recognition marked STEP's second Zero Project Award.

Outputs / Impact:

- Strengthened international recognition of STEP's innovation.
- Highlighted technology-based approaches to disability inclusion.
- Increased visibility of accessible digital solutions.

Activity 11: Capacity Building on Disability Inclusion in GBV Response

Activity Date / Period: 11 April 2026

Location / Scope: Pakistan

Progress: In collaboration with UNFPA Pakistan, STEP conducted a two-day capacity-building training for organizations and stakeholders working on GBV response. Participants included government officials from Sindh, Balochistan, KP and Punjab, civil society representatives, and relevant departments. The training covered disability legislation, intersectionality, inclusive referral pathways, accessibility, and meaningful participation.

Outputs / Impact:

- Strengthened capacity of GBV stakeholders on disability inclusion.
- Improved understanding of inclusive referral pathways and accessibility.
- Promoted cross-sector approaches to disability-inclusive GBV prevention and response.

Activity 12: Leadership Conference of Persons with Disabilities

Activity Date / Period: 4 May 2026

Location / Scope: Islamabad

Progress: STEP organized the Leadership Conference of Persons with Disabilities with support from IFES. Emerging OPD leaders from KP shared their experiences as implementing partners under the PFAR project. Participants discussed rights-based legislation and pledged to strengthen advocacy for disability rights and UNCRPD-aligned commitments.

Outputs / Impact:

- Strengthened leadership and advocacy capacity of OPDs.
- Created opportunities for networking and experience sharing.
- Promoted rights-based legislation and implementation of disability-inclusive commitments.

Activity 13: World Assistive Technology Day – AT Awareness and Social Media Contest

Activity Date / Period: 15 May–3 June 2026

Location / Scope: Pakistan / Online

Progress: STEP, in collaboration with Bangladesh Disabled Development Trust and with support from ATscale, conducted an Assistive Technology awareness campaign and Pakistan's first Digital AT Social Media Contest. Activities included an introductory webinar, participant engagement, a public hearing on access to assistive technology, an extension of the contest deadline, and announcement of winners. The initiative highlighted barriers related to cost, availability, quality, and limited support.

Outputs / Impact:

- Increased public awareness of assistive technology.
- Provided a platform for users to share their experiences and challenges.
- Strengthened advocacy for improved access to appropriate assistive technology.

Activity 15: Inclusive Education Advocacy

Activity Date / Period: 13 July 2026

Location / Scope: Pakistan

Progress: STEP advocated for greater accessibility in education and highlighted inaccessible infrastructure as a major barrier to the participation of children with disabilities. STEP called for stronger collaboration among government, UN agencies, education institutions, and other stakeholders to advance inclusive education.

Outputs / Impact:

- Strengthened advocacy for accessible and inclusive education.
- Highlighted infrastructure and accessibility barriers.
- Encouraged collaboration among key education and disability stakeholders.

Activity 16: Free Quran Education for Children with Disabilities at NSSES

Activity Date / Period: 20 July 2026

Location / Scope: Noor-e-Sehar Special Education School, Daharki

Progress: STEP initiated a dedicated space for free Quranic education for children with disabilities at Noor-e-Sehar Special Education School (NSSES), which is managed by STEP with support from Mari Energies. The initiative forms part of a broader effort to promote accessible and inclusive Quranic education.

Outputs / Impact:

- Expanded learning opportunities for children with disabilities.
- Promoted accessible religious education.
- Strengthened inclusive educational support within the school environment.

Activity 17: Youth Inclusion and Digital Skills / Freelancing Opportunity

Activity Date / Period: 12–19 August 2026

Location / Scope: Pakistan / Online

Progress: STEP marked International Youth Day by highlighting young persons with disabilities as leaders and changemakers. STEP also promoted free introductory online freelancing training to support young persons with disabilities in developing digital skills and exploring pathways toward financial independence.

Outputs / Impact:

- Promoted youth leadership and participation.
- Increased awareness of digital skills and freelancing opportunities.
- Encouraged pathways toward economic empowerment and independence for youth with disabilities.

Activity 18: Recognition of Abia Akram with Tamgha-i-Imtiaz

Activity Date / Period: August 2026

Location / Scope: Pakistan

Progress: STEP recognized and celebrated Ms. Abia Akram's receipt of the **Tamgha-i-Imtiaz** from the Government of Pakistan in recognition of her contribution to disability rights, inclusion, and social change. The recognition also highlighted STEP's continued contribution to rights-based legislation and the meaningful participation of persons with disabilities.

Outputs / Impact:

- Recognized leadership and contribution to disability rights.
- Increased national visibility of disability inclusion.
- Highlighted the importance of meaningful participation and rights-based approaches.

Activity 19: Collaboration with Saaya Association

Activity Date / Period: 24 October 2025

Location / Scope: Pakistan

Progress: STEP engaged with Saaya Association to explore opportunities for collaboration in advancing disability inclusion and empowerment, with discussions covering accessibility, employment, equal rights, and potential areas of joint engagement.

Outputs / Impact:

- Strengthened networking with disability-sector organizations.
- Identified potential areas for collaborative action.
- Promoted partnership-building around accessibility, employment, and equal rights.

4. Thematic Progress

4.1 Disability Rights, Advocacy and Policy Engagement

- STEP continued to position disability rights, accessibility, inclusive legislation, representation, and meaningful participation as core advocacy priorities.
- Leadership and policy engagement focused on strengthening the representation and participation of persons with disabilities, including women with disabilities, in decision-making processes.
- The Leadership Conference of Persons with Disabilities strengthened OPD leadership, networking, and advocacy for rights-based legislation and implementation of disability-inclusive commitments.
- Public advocacy, awareness initiatives, and media engagement increased visibility of disability rights, accessibility, and inclusive policy issues.

4.2 Inclusive Education and Higher Education

- STEP advanced inclusive higher education through the Learning for All initiative and collaboration with NUST, Coventry University, and Manchester Metropolitan University.
- The Equal Access Hub initiative promoted dedicated support mechanisms for students with disabilities and improved access and participation in higher education.
- Training and seminars focused on rights-based inclusion, accessibility, respect, acceptance, and understanding of the lived experiences of persons with disabilities.
- STEP continued national advocacy around inaccessible infrastructure and other barriers contributing to the exclusion of children with disabilities from education.

4.3 Gender-Based Violence and Protection

- STEP strengthened disability-inclusive GBV programming through research, focus group discussions, technical advisory processes, capacity-building activities, and referral-pathway initiatives.
- Collaboration with UNFPA and government stakeholders addressed accessibility across health, police, justice, social support, and other relevant services.

- The 16 Days of Activism campaign highlighted technology-facilitated GBV and the specific vulnerabilities and protection needs of women and girls with disabilities.
- The Kar Yaqeen psychosocial helpline was promoted as an accessible and confidential support mechanism for women with disabilities experiencing GBV, harassment, or emotional distress.

4.4 Assistive Technology and Digital Inclusion

- STEP promoted awareness of barriers to assistive technology, including affordability, availability, quality, and limited institutional support.
- The Digital Assistive Technology Social Media Contest provided a platform for AT users and advocates to share experiences and contribute to public awareness and advocacy.
- A public hearing on access to assistive technology provided an opportunity to highlight user experiences, identify system-level gaps, and discuss practical solutions.
- Technology innovation remained an important area of STEP's work through initiatives such as NOOR AI and the Equal Access application.

4.5 Economic Empowerment, Employment and Livelihoods

- STEP strengthened engagement with the private sector through its partnership with HBL Microfinance Bank to promote financial inclusion and livelihood opportunities for persons with disabilities.
- The organization promoted free introductory online freelancing training for young persons with disabilities to support digital skills development and pathways toward financial independence.
- STEP also promoted employment, internship, and skills-development opportunities to improve access to economic participation for persons with disabilities.

4.6 Leadership, Partnerships and Institutional Collaboration

- STEP collaborated with government departments, UN agencies, universities, development partners, private-sector institutions, OPDs, and civil society organizations.
- The organization facilitated and participated in multi-stakeholder initiatives addressing disability inclusion, GBV, education, accessibility, assistive technology, leadership, and economic empowerment.
- Engagement with organizations such as Saaya Association and other disability-sector partners contributed to strengthening collaborative networks and identifying opportunities for joint action.

4.7 Inclusive Community and Educational Support

- STEP continued to promote inclusive educational opportunities at Noor-e-Sehar Special Education School (NSSES), Daharki, including the establishment of a dedicated space for free Quranic education for children with disabilities.
- The activity record reflects continued emphasis on providing children and young people with disabilities with accessible opportunities for learning, participation, personal development, and social inclusion.

5. Key Achievements and Milestones

→ Strengthened disability-inclusive GBV programming through research, technical advisory engagement, capacity building, and referral-pathway development.

→ Increased awareness of technology-facilitated gender-based violence and the specific protection need of women and girls with disabilities.

→ Advanced inclusive higher education through the Learning for All initiative, Equal Access Hub, and rights-based student training.

→ Achieved international recognition for STEP's technology and resilience initiatives through the Zero Project Award, including recognition associated with NOOR AI and Equal Access.

→ Strengthened economic inclusion through partnership with HBL Microfinance Bank and promotion of livelihood and digital skills opportunities.

→ Promoted assistive technology awareness and user-led advocacy through a digital AT campaign, social media contest, and public hearing.

→ Strengthened OPD leadership and advocacy through the Leadership Conference of Persons with Disabilities.

→ Promoted youth inclusion, digital skills development, and freelancing opportunities for young persons with disabilities.

→ Increased national visibility of disability inclusion through advocacy, policy engagement, public awareness, and recognition of STEP leadership.

→ Expanded collaboration among government institutions, UN agencies, universities, development partners, private-sector organizations, OPDs, and civil society.

6. Stakeholder and Partnership Engagement

During the reporting period, STEP engaged with a broad range of stakeholders and partners, including:

- United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Pakistan
- British Council / GGP
- NUST University
- Coventry University
- Manchester Metropolitan University
- IFES (International Foundation for Electoral Systems)
- HBL / Habib Microfinance Bank
- Government departments of Sindh, Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Punjab
- Ministry of Human Rights and other federal government stakeholders
- National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW)
- National Commission on the Rights of Child (NCRC)
- Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs)
- Saaya Association
- Bangladesh Disabled Development Trust (BDDT)
- ATscale / Global Partnership for Assistive Technology
- UNICEF Pakistan and UNESCO Pakistan in relation to inclusive education advocacy
- Mari Energies
- Noor-e-Sehar Special Education School (NSSES), Daharki

These partnerships supported STEP's work across disability rights, inclusive education, GBV prevention and response, assistive technology, economic empowerment, leadership development, and community inclusion.

7. Communication, Awareness and Public Outreach

STEP maintained an active communication and public outreach approach throughout the reporting period. Communication activities supported the organization's broader programmatic priorities by highlighting disability rights, advocacy, inclusion, accessibility, education, assistive technology, gender-based violence, youth participation, employment, and community engagement.

Key areas of public outreach included the 16 Days of Activism campaign, Assistive Technology awareness campaign, inclusive education advocacy, youth inclusion and digital skills messaging, disability rights advocacy, and communication around national and international disability-related initiatives. These communication and awareness efforts contributed to:

- Increasing public visibility of disability rights and inclusion.
- Highlighting the experiences and priorities of persons with disabilities.

- Promoting accessible services, opportunities, and support mechanisms.
- Disseminating information on employment, skills development, and participation opportunities.
- Strengthening awareness of emerging issues such as technology-facilitated GBV and assistive technology access.
- Showcasing partnerships, innovations, achievements, and advocacy efforts undertaken by STEP.

8. Observed Challenges

→ Accessibility barriers continue to affect education, employment, public participation, and access to services for persons with disabilities.

→ Women and girls with disabilities remain exposed to specific protection risks, including technology-facilitated GBV, and require accessible reporting, referral, psychosocial, and support mechanisms.

→ Access to assistive technology continues to be affected by affordability, availability, quality, and limited institutional and technical support.

→ Disability-inclusive systems require continued capacity building across government institutions, service providers, educational institutions, employers, and other stakeholders.

→ Representation and meaningful participation of persons with disabilities, particularly women with disabilities, remain important policy and institutional priorities.

→ Employment and economic inclusion require sustained partnerships, accessible skills development, inclusive recruitment practices, and practical pathways toward financial independence.

→ Continued coordination among government, development partners, private-sector institutions, OPDs, and civil society remains important for translating disability-inclusive policies into effective implementation.

9. Way Forward 2026 – 2027

→ Continue strengthening disability-inclusive GBV systems, including accessible referral pathways, service-provider capacity, and survivor-centred support.

→ Scale inclusive higher education initiatives and institutional accessibility mechanisms such as the Equal Access Hub.

→ Expand assistive technology advocacy, user-led awareness, and policy dialogue to address affordability, availability, quality, and support services.

- → Strengthen employment and livelihood pathways through private-sector partnerships, freelancing and digital skills development, and accessible recruitment opportunities.
- → Continue leadership development of OPDs and support evidence-based advocacy for rights-based legislation and effective implementation.
- → Build on technology innovation and digital accessibility initiatives, including AI-enabled solutions for persons with disabilities.
- → Strengthen youth leadership and participation of young persons with disabilities in education, employment, civic engagement, and decision-making.
- → Maintain and expand strategic collaboration with government institutions, UN agencies, universities, development partners, private-sector organizations, and OPDs.
- → Strengthen systematic documentation of activities, beneficiaries, outputs, and outcomes to support evidence-based programme management and future reporting.

10. Conclusion

During the reporting period from 6 October 2025 to 6 October 2026, the Special Talent Exchange Program (STEP) continued to advance disability inclusion through advocacy, policy engagement, inclusive education, gender-based violence prevention and response, assistive technology, economic empowerment, youth development, leadership, and strategic partnerships.

The year reflected significant progress in strengthening disability-inclusive systems and expanding collaboration with government institutions, UN agencies, universities, development partners, private-sector organizations, OPDs, and civil society. Initiatives such as the Learning for All programme, Equal Access Hub, disability-inclusive GBV interventions, assistive technology advocacy, Leadership Conference of Persons with Disabilities, NOOR AI, and financial inclusion partnerships contributed to greater awareness, participation, accessibility, and opportunities for persons with disabilities.

STEP also continued to strengthen public awareness and advocacy around the rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities, while promoting opportunities for education, digital skills, employment, financial inclusion, and meaningful participation. International recognition through the Zero Project Award further demonstrated the potential and visibility of STEP's innovative approaches to disability inclusion.

Moving forward, STEP will continue to build on these achievements by strengthening inclusive systems, expanding strategic partnerships, supporting OPD leadership, promoting accessible education and employment, advancing assistive technology and digital inclusion, and ensuring

that persons with disabilities remain at the centre of advocacy, policy, and development processes.

Overall, the reporting period demonstrates STEP's continued commitment to advancing a rights-based, inclusive, accessible, and equitable society in which persons with disabilities can participate meaningfully and exercise their rights and opportunities on an equal basis with others**.**