

Rani Bibi: A Story of Courage and Vision¹

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Thirty nine year old Rani Bibi, who lives in village Thekriwala (U/C Burj Attari, Tehsil Sheikhupura) is living proof that severe physical disability does not have to mean a lifetime of dependence and poverty. Because of her ability to recognize an opportunity, and to work very hard, she has brought about profound changes in her own and her family's social and economic status.



Like most residents of her village, Rani Bibi was accustomed to being poor. She always thought that her disability – she is only 1.5 feet tall – would make it impossible to change the way things were. She was determined to live an honorable life in spite of her disability and wanted to be self reliant and a role model for others.

Even if Rani Bibi had not faced physical challenges, things would still have been difficult: she is the eldest daughter of parents who are too old to work. Her sisters were working as domestic servants but Rani Bibi had no chance of being employed.

The opportunity to change things for the better arose when the Punjab Rural Support Programme started to work in her village in November 2006. The PRSP staff encouraged women to form a Community Organisation and Rani Bibi's sister Shukria became a member a month later. They called their CO Aakash ("heaven"). A Community Organisation is a group of about 15 to 20 people who decide to work together to alleviate poverty. The Rural Support Programme's role is to encourage people to consider their potential to earn and to identify opportunities to improve their lives. PRSP then links the CO members with services such as micro-credit and business development training.

Shukria attended the CO meetings regularly and found the process beneficial. She invited her sister Rani to a meeting. Rani Bibi quickly saw the value of being a CO member and joined the CO. The PRSP Social Organiser encouraged her to start a home-based enterprise, as the

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other CO members were doing. It was the first time Rani Bibi had been offered this kind of opportunity. She was most interested in establishing a small shop selling cloth. At first there were delays, because she did not have a Computerized National Identity Card and so was not eligible for micro credit. Another CO member had started a business selling hand-made lace and ribbon and Rani began to make these items and sell them in her friend's shop. Rani earned Rs. 20 to 30 per day, which was useful but not enough to meet her needs. She then joined a training programme which PRSP offered free of charge, and learned to use a sewing machine.

Her sister Shukria Bibi got a loan for Rs. 10,000 from PRSP in February 2007 and she and Rani became partners in a cloth-selling business. Although Shukria invested the money, it was Rani who ran the business. She bought cloth from the main market close to their home and sold it in nearby villages. She was now earning Rs 100 to 200 profit every day. As a business partner, she took on the responsibility of paying the installments on her sister's loan and was able to save a small amount from her daily earnings. Her fellow CO members in Aakash acknowledged the efforts of this brave woman and helped her to get a CNIC. They also recommended her for a loan of Rs.10, 000 from PRSP.

Rani Bibi was greatly encouraged by the fact that she was earning and had gained the respect of her family and fellow CO members. She used the credit to strengthen her business. She is now well-known in the nearby villages and instead of travelling to sell cloth in the villages, her customers come to her house to buy cloth and have garments made. She now earns a monthly profit of Rs. 6,000 to 7,000.

She is an asset to her family, her CO and PRSP. She has served her parents "like a son" and her family is both grateful to her and proud of her accomplishments. Rani Bibi even paid for the marriage of one of her sisters. She has become very popular and is trusted by the CO members. Her fellow CO members deposit their credit recovery installments and their belongings with her for safe keeping. Using the 'cascading' methodology, PRSP has trained Rani Bibi as a 'master trainer'; she has trained 8 more young women as 'master trainers' and she now teaches other women how to sew.

She is called Rani Baji in the village and all of the men, women and children show her respect. Her family is living happily and she feels that she is a respectable and self-reliant member of society, instead of someone who is viewed as inferior. She believes that every

'special person' could earn a name in society if she or he has the willpower and courage to do something. People with disabilities are extremely sensitive in nature both physically and mentally. Even survival can be a challenge, but if they are encouraged and treated in the same way as others, they can do wonders. Rani Bibi's success is testimony to this fact.