

## Gul Naz: A Story of diligence and perseverance<sup>1</sup>

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The story that I am narrating here, is that of a poor yet courageous woman who through sheer hard work and determination changed her own destiny. She thought of poverty as a challenge, and made every effort to fight this challenge, managing to get not only what she hoped for but much more. Today, Gul Naz, who was once unable to provide regular meals to her children, is busy educating them. No decision takes place in her village without her presence. She was once seen as a mere poor woman and her words were of no value, today she is respected everywhere for her diligence and perseverance.

Gul Naz belongs to a poor family in village Sheewah of district Swaabi and was married off at the age of eighteen while studying in the fifth grade. The family she was married into was poorer than her own and could barely afford three meals a day. Due to familial pressure, Gul Naz was forced to abandon her education and move to her husband's house. Her husband was a labourer and did not earn enough to meet the needs of the family. According to Gul Naz, while her husband managed to earn a little in the winter months, he could not manage to bring anything home during the summers. Gul Naz was terribly depressed after her marriage as all hopes of a better life after marriage were slowly shattered. She had once hoped to continue her education after getting married but her poverty does not allow her to do so.

When she goes to collect her certificate from her old primary school, her school teacher refuses to provide her with one. Dejected, she returns to her husband's village where she meets the principal of a local school called 'Ifra Model School'. Relating her story to him and she expresses her desire to continue her studies and he agrees to let her join the school. At last, managing both her household responsibilities as well as her studies she passes eighth grade and receives her Middle School Certificate. Along with her studies Gul Naz also manages to take out time for embroidery work that she had learnt at home. After passing eighth grade she does not have money to further continue her studies and is forced to abandon her education once again. Gul Naz decides to borrow 25,000 rupees from a neighbor and sell the jewels she received as a part of her dowry, to buy an Embroidery Machine. She opens a 'Dastakari Centre' at home, where local girls are trained in embroidery work. The girls have to only pay 50 rupees as an admission fee and 20 rupees as monthly fees, but if they are too poor to pay, Gul Naz lets them learn for

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks are due to the author and NRSP management for their permission to put the story on RSPN's website. The original article was in Urdu and translated by Shiza Malik, Research Intern RSPN.

free. Soon, girls from all over the village join the centre and Gul Naz begins to cover her costs but considers having taught a useful skill to the poor girls of the village, her greatest achievement.

Soon after, a project called Integrated Rural Development Project (IRDP) begins work in District Swaabi providing vocational training to local people. Gul Naz contacts them and begins training with them, improving upon her skill. She learns everything she is taught with great enthusiasm and diligence. She receives a certificate for a three month training course. Along with the training she also gains belief in her own self and is no longer the unskilled and uneducated woman that she once was, she is now capable of running her centre better than before which is now managing to feed her and her family. During this time she also gives birth to two children, a boy and a girl, and it becomes even more difficult for her to manage giving time to both her work and her children, yet she remains committed to her work. Then one day, a project called 'Literacy for All (LFA)' comes to Gul Naz's village. The project was looking to hire women who had skills that they could teach to others. Gul Naz joins the project and is hired at a salary of 4000 rupees a month. Gul Naz, who was once too poor to afford her meals becomes the main bread earner for the family, she also manages to enroll her children into schools so that they don't have to go through the same ordeal as her. Her husband once disapproved of her work because it was against the tradition of her area, where women only remain in the house, but is now by her side. Gul Naz is now a fully qualified embroidery teacher and is currently training over fifty girls. The girls once trained are capable of training other girls who are still only paying 70 rupees to receive training at the centre.

Gul Naz is now very happy with the success of her endeavors, she is capable of earning for her family alongside her husband and of sending her children to school. She dreams of someday supporting them in receiving further education. According to her, she was once a nobody in the village and today she is regarded with respect and her word is valued all over the village. She says that she wants to tell everyone that Poverty is curse and a challenge that should be fought against. Poor people are fully capable of changing their conditions if they have the will and the determination to do so. Gul Naz's message for poor women everywhere is that they must come forward and show the world that they are significant members of society, fully capable of participating in and contributing towards economic growth.

Along with teaching, Gul Naz is also working with NRSP as a voluntary Activist. She has, till today formed 42 Community Organizations (COs) on her own with 714 members. She hold meetings with the COs twice a month and encourages them to save, work hard and hold regular meetings. She is now trying to organize all women in the village into COs.

Future Plans:

1. According to Gul Naz, the LFA project is being moved to Mardan next but she wants to continue her centre in Swaabi so that young girls continue to learn skills here. However, she requires the following things from NRSP and other organizations to continue her work,
2. She wants the centre to run independent of the project so that if the project ends the centre does not close down with it.
3. We have a number of poor girls in our village who want to learn as well but we do not have enough machines to teach them and would like support in buying more machines.
4. I want to continue my work in Swaabi and teach skills to poor people so that they can free their children from the slavery of poverty.