

Programme Introduction

In 2008, Mr Shoaib Sultan Khan, Chairman Rural Support Programmes Network (RSPN), and Dr. Rashid Bajwa, Chief Executive Officer National Rural Support Programme (NRSP), conceptualised the Union Council Based Poverty Reduction Programme (UCBPRP), and undertook policy advocacy with the Government of Sindh (GoS). In 2009, the Chief Minister of Sindh considerably agreed to support the Sindh Rural Support Organisation (SRSO) to implement UCBPRP in Shikarpur district. Under UCBPRP, SRSO mobilised rural women to foster their own Community Institutions. Rural women formed Community Organisations (COs) at *mohalla* level, then federated COs into village level, Village Organisations (VOs), and finally the VOs were federated at the Union Council level into Local Support Organisations (LSOs) in rural areas of the district. Organised women then began to take initiatives to improve their families' livelihoods and lives, some through self-help measures and some with SRSO's support.

This is a case study of one of the community members that clearly demonstrates the positive economic and social change that has been brought about by GoS's UCBPRP leading to reduction in poverty and generating hope for a better future.

Bilquis's story of success and sacrifice

Bilquis Hakdo, 45, was born in Juma Nehal area of Shikarpur. She was the third of her six siblings; three sisters and three brothers. Her father was a government employee who worked in the Department of Forestry in Shikarpur. Her parents' home was comfortable and had access to electricity, gas and water supply. The family owned 40 acres of land. The family was leading a good life. Later, her father was terminated from his job and he became a farmer. She said that she was loved the most by her father who fulfilled all



her wishes except her desire of getting an education. She said that she was a position holder in her primary school. When she passed her fourth grade and asked her father to buy books for grade five, he refused. She narrated, *"I was healthy, fair and pretty and my parents were insecure about me. The society was not good for girls at that time. Therefore, my father prohibited me from going out in the city and I left the school. Apart from that, he fulfilled all my wishes. He brought everything that I demanded from him. My mother was a Baloch; apart*

from domestic chores, she made laces, and Rillies, handmade bed sheets, at home. I learned cooking, and making bed sheets from my mother."

Bilquis was only 12 years old when her father's friend selected a groom for her. She narrated, "this friend of my father was from a village and he brought the groom's brother who met my father. Looking at the groom's brother, my father thought the groom will also be healthy and young like him, so he consented to my marriage. However, on the day of our engagement, my father came to know that my to-be husband was already 37 years old. My father got very disappointed by his decision about my marriage. He agreed for the engagement with the promise that my younger sister will get married to my husband's younger brother. They decided her engagement while she was playing in the mud outside the house. My younger sister was just eight years old and did not even know what marriage was. My father thought that both of us, sisters, would be married off in the same village, so that it would be easier to survive for us. As a matter of tradition, my father gifted me nose and earrings made of gold, as part of my dowry."

Bilquis started her married life in a two room mud house in the village. Her husband was a step son of his mother, and a taxi driver. Her husband's family included his step mother, father and seven siblings; three brothers and four sisters. Her father-in-law was a farmer and younger brother-in-law caught fish for the family and also helped his father in farming. She said that her life became very difficult after her marriage. She was not accustomed to the household chores. "It took me half an hour to collect a single bucket of water from the Mullah's house in the village. We had to wait for our turn to collect water. Here, we did not have gas supply; we had to collect cow dung and dry it in the sun and used the dried dung cakes to make fire for cooking purpose. We also did not have toilets; we went to the bushes for defecation."

After two years of her marriage, a baby girl was born. Later, with the gap of two years between each child, she had five children; three sons and two daughters. After the birth of her third child, she got admission at an Adult Education Centre. From this centre Bilquis passed grade eight. Later, she carried on studying from home and managed to complete her matriculation. After this, Bilquis applied for, and was appointed as, the local Lady Health Worker (LHW) and became a government employee. Initially, she received Rs. 1,500 as her monthly salary. She said that she was trained on vaccination, polio immunisation, and general health and hygiene. She undertook door to door visits for awareness-raising on vaccination of newly born babies, and also administered polio drops to children. Also, she guided pregnant females in the village about maternal health issues.

"One day a village woman came to me to ask for her CNIC that was with me. I had it to update my records. I asked her as to why she needed the CNIC. She replied that an organisation named SRSO is visiting the village. They support poor women. They want us to get together and foster a Community Organisation, and that they will support us in the group. This caught my interest and I walked to the meeting venue with her. I observed the meeting and then told the female Social Organiser that being the local Lady Health Worker, I knew everyone in the village and the village women also know me very well. I can convince the village women to organise.

I returned to my home and convinced women from my neighbourhood to form a CO. Our CO consisted of 15 members in the beginning, later others also joined and the membership increased to 22. We named the newly formed CO Awais, after my son. The CO members

selected me as their president and I attended all the training sessions, related to meetings management, record keeping and savings, organised by SRSO.”

She continued to add that: “as all villagers knew me from the beginning as LHW, it was easier for me to spread the news in other communities too. Initially, the Shia community did not allow SRSO team to meet their women. However, I used to attend Majalis with the Shia (Muslim) women. I went to them and asked them to make a CO of the females who attend the Majalis. They agreed. This way we managed to cover the whole village. All the COs federated to form our Village Organisation. Later, in 2010, 24 VOs at the Union Council level federated in to the Local Support Organisation (LSO). Mehran was the name we chose for our LSO. The LSO consists of 24 General Body Members and 13 board members. All members agreed to select me as the chairperson of the LSO.”

Apart from Community Investment Fund (CIF), the first project that the LSO was given by SRSO was Livestock Project. She narrated, “being the chairperson of the LSO, I was responsible for implementation of the project. We surveyed the households in the LSO jurisdiction. We collected information and identified the needy household in the LSO. I worked from 9 am to 7 pm in 18 VOs when this project was given to our LSO. We distributed livestock among the COs, according to the needs of the members. Apart from this, as I was a government health worker, I had to make sure to fulfil my professional responsibilities as well.”

“I stayed involved in all LSO activities and allocated more than 70% of my day light time to the community’s work. I was very keen to work for the betterment of my community since the formation of the first CO. Therefore, I worked with my heart and soul. At personal level, I was economically sound. My sons were grown up and my husband also worked. At home, my sisters-in-law made negative comments about my mobility in the union council, and about my behaviour, but I ignored it.”

Speaking about the challenges Bilquis mentioned that one of the major challenges after the formation of LSO was that they did not have a common space to hold their LSO meetings. Their members belonged to various castes, and they had inter caste tensions and stereotypes. Many female members refused to attend the meetings, because the venue of the meeting belonged to a person from the other caste. Therefore, collectively they decided to ask one of the local landlords, who was also their treasurer’s uncle, to donate them a piece of land where they could construct the LSO office. As the landlord was already happy about his relatives’ economic development that was brought about through CIF, he allocated a plot of land near the village. Collectively, they levelled the land, and from the LSO savings, and their members’ donations, they were able to construct a large single room for LSO office. During the construction phase, Bilquis was very busy supervising the labourers. So, she usually had to go back home very late in the evenings. This made her family angry. She had to face her sisters-in-law’s taunts and her brothers-in-law’s arguments and objections. However, she used to take her dinner and silently go to bed. This kept happening for months. It was not easy to face all this. However, her work with the community gave her peace and for some time she forgot how her family behaved with her.

“Apart from my activities at LSO level, as an LHW I worked voluntarily to train other people in the 2010 floods affected Kashmore district. I monitored the trainees, and trained many people on health and hygiene, for several days. SRSO paid me an honorarium for this work, and I gave this money to my family at home,” Bilquis said while adding, “I have attended several training sessions offered by SRSO. I have travelled to Islamabad, Sukkur and other cities to attend these

training sessions. I also supported other community members for attending some training sessions. These training included, CIF distribution mechanism, tailoring, and making Ajrak and purses. Further, SRSO linked the LSO with many other organisations, including Sabah Pakistan."

Through Sabah Pakistan's Enterprise Development Project, she described, "I got a chance to visit India. The main objective of this trip was to show us how SEWA women have been working in India. They wanted us to get inspiration from their work and work like the SEWA members, who have been working successfully for the last 40 years. It was an 11-day long training trip. I had informed my family about the opportunity of visiting India, three months earlier. They did not take me seriously. They made fun of me, saying, 'oh yes!! They will take you to India and teach you.' But, I was serious. With the help of the SRSO team, I obtained my passport and photographs, and Sabah Pakistan arranged a visa for me. Finally, the day arrived when I had to leave for the bus station to travel to Lahore. The conveyance facility was provided by Sabah Pakistan. As the bus to Lahore had to leave at 1 am, the vehicle came to my street to pick me up at 11:00pm. Observing this all, the villagers became doubtful about my character. They thought that I had eloped with some outsider. The rumours spread out in the whole Union Council, while I left for a wonderfully exciting trip to India. The villagers told my brothers-in-law that I will make other women like myself. They threatened that if they did not kick me out from the house, then they will be isolated, or thrown out of the Biradari. I was in contact with some of my CO members and my brothers at home."

"When I landed back in Pakistan, I was informed that I am not allowed to go to my home. I came to know that my younger brother-in-law, who had married my younger sister, had beaten my sister and threatened to divorce her. This was particularly damaging, because now I was seen as a cause of trouble for all my family members. Since the relations had deteriorated, I chose to live with my brothers' families. However, I was not at peace. I wanted to go to my own house, the house that I had built under my supervision. I wanted to see and meet my children. But, for many years they didn't allow me to meet my children. My brother's wife was unhappy with me, because I was staying with them for very long. I felt remorse every day. My husband wanted to take me back, but his brothers were very strict; they didn't allow him to see me. Everyone, including my eldest son, was annoyed. After two years, my children visited me and I came back to my house with them," she expressed.

The SRSO team visited her house again, but this time her family prohibited her from attending meetings. She really wanted to arrange a programme at her LSO level, and share her Indian experience with the CO members. She also wanted all the villagers who had spread rumours of her elopement to know that she went on to the trip with a purpose and learned so many things.

Bilquis says, "today, I am still the president of LSO Mehran. The members have trust in me. They elected me again, but I am not allowed to attend the meetings. I talk to my LSO members over the phone and give my opinion. My eldest son doesn't allow my granddaughters to meet me. However, my youngest son is always on my side."