

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.

Gulshad Begum leads her family towards prosperity

Gulshad Begum, 37, was born and brought up in a resource deprived village named as Muhammad Ibrahim Soomro in Shikarpur Sindh. Her father was a Primary School Teacher, and her mother was a housewife, and farmer. She was the first-born out of her eight siblings: six sisters and two brothers. Her family lived in a single-room mud house. She states that the society was very strict and conservative regarding girls' mobility. However, being educated, her father was idealistic in the



village. He allowed her to get education, going against the strict norms of the society. Gulshad completed her grade five exams from the village school. She learned the art of embroidery from her mother who made embroidery items in her free time.

Gulshad got married at the age of 15, when she was a student of grade five. Her husband was the second out of his six siblings: three sisters and three brothers. Her in-laws farmed their own land. They lived as a joint-family of 25 members, including her husband's parents, uncles and their families, and siblings. She stated that the family cultivated all seasonal crops and

barely made the ends meet. She said that during non-availability of financial resources they borrowed money on interest and returned at the time of the harvesting season.

She stated that her husband was the laziest and least sociable, due to which he could not get any job. She said, *“my husband was dependent on his siblings and parents for all his expenses. I cursed my fate for marrying a person who could not afford a single meal for his family.”* Gulshad, on the contrary, was a very determined individual. Despite remaining engaged in the household chores, she was able to take time out, study, and appear in home-take exams, completing her education up to 8th grade.

A couple of years after her marriage, she gave birth to a baby son. Later, with the gap of 2 or three years in between, she had five more children: three daughters and two sons. She said, *“as my husband was not employed, I had to work hard to make the elders in the family happy.”* She worked on the farms, collected cow dung and dried it up, and also collected firewood for cooking meals. *Doing all of this routinely*, she had very less time to look after her children.

She says that with the passage of time, her brother-in-law also got married and the family size reached near 50. The family needed more resources: more space to live and food to eat. However, there was no increment in the resources, which were already insufficient for the family. Tensions started appearing over resources, leading to splitting of the family.

After separation from the joint family, she started to live in a single-room mud house that her husband inherited. Also, her husband received a small piece of land where the family grew rice or wheat. She said, *“at that time food was sufficient and shelter was good enough; however, I was worried about my children’s future. I knew that as the children grow up, they will need more resources. I used to have arguments with my husband because, unlike his brothers, he was very lazy. He did not acquire any skill, except from farming the land.”*

One day her sister-in-law invited Gulshad to her home to attend a women’s meeting. She said, *“my sister-in-law told me that an organisation called SRSO wanted to work with women to improve livelihood. When the people from that organisation visit the village, all the women have to get together at her hut. The village men and women, including my mother-in-law, prohibited us from meeting the outsiders. However, “my sister-in-law’s father was always encouraging; he had met the SRSO Social Organisers and understood that the organisation was beneficial for the local women.”*

She said, *“we secretly met the social organisers when they visited our village. They asked us to form a community organisation (CO) and also to inform all the women in the neighbourhood. They said that SRSO will work with the CO to support further activities. In line with the social organisers’ request, we gathered all the women from the neighbourhood, and formed a CO, naming it Sitaara (Star). The newly formed CO started having weekly meetings in 2009. Initially the Social organiser conducted the meeting. Some of the women hesitated to attend the meeting but later joined us after observing our meetings and gaining confidence,”* she added.

As Gulshad knew how to read and write, her CO members selected her as their treasurer to keep record of the meetings. She said, hiding herself from her mother in law, she attended training sessions organised by SRSO on meeting management and record keeping. She said that most of the time she made excuses, telling her family members that she is going to the hospital, or for some other work, while going to the meetings and training sessions.

After the CO formation, social organisers from SRSO asked the members to develop Micro Investment Plans for the individual household. She stated, *“in MIP, I mentioned that I wanted to invest in my agriculture. In 2010, I received a loan of Rs. 10,000 that I used to purchase seeds and pesticides for seasonal crops. I sold the surplus yield on harvest and returned the loan after six months. In 2011, I applied for another loan for the same purpose and received CIF of Rs. 15,000. I again invested the amount in agriculture, purchasing seasonal crops seed and pesticide sprays to increase the yield. This increased productivity of the land and I benefitted from high yield. I returned the CIF loan in harvesting season. Now, as I had enough yield to preserve seeds for the next season, I applied for another loan to buy a heifer. In 2012, I received a loan of Rs. 25,000. With this money I purchased a baby buffalo. I returned the loan in installments during the crop harvesting season. Now, the buffalo has produced a calf. It also added nutrition to the family’s diet, in the form of milk, and other dairy products.”*

Apart from CIF, Gulshad trained as a Traditional Birth Attendant during a training conducted by SRSO. She started working as mid-wife, and added to the family’s income. Later, she was hired as a Community Health Worker, with a salary of Rs. 15,000 per month. Meanwhile, her husband got a job in a brick manufacturing company. Confident of their economic condition, they have started construction of a concrete house.

She stated, *“I availed all these opportunities by becoming a member of the CO. These opportunities did not only enhance my livelihood but also helped me groom as a person. Throughout my journey with CO and SRSO I gained the valuable knowledge to utilise and enhance my skills. I always wanted to study, but I was not able to pursue my dream, because girls in the village did not go to high schools. I got motivation from the Social Organisers (SOs), who were women, just like us, but educated, confident and aware of everything. They were a source of inspiration for me. Observing the SOs, and many other educated women during our trainings, I was inspired, and worked hard to study. Later, I appeared in home-take exams and completed 10th grade education. I look forward to continue studying from home and complete my FA (intermediate) next year,”* said Gulshad, with a confident smile breaking on her face.

She plans to educate her children to the university level. Her eldest son, 17, studies in 11th grade. The second, third, fourth and fifth - 15, 11, 9 and 5 years old, respectively - are studying in grade eight, five, four and three. Their youngest son is just one year old. She says, *“not being aware about contraceptives methods, we used to have big families. Now, I am aware, and being a CHW, I spread awareness about contraceptives, sanitation, health and hygiene in my locality.”* This, helped improve the quality of the people’s lives. Gulshad is thankful to SRSO for bringing a quantum change in her family’s life, and she feels grateful for the opportunities that she received through Sitaara, the women’s own organisation.

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