

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.

Rehana Memon's story of using COs for a great cause

Rehana Memon, 31, was born and brought up in village Bakhtawar of Shikarpur. Her father was a labourer, and mother a housewife. Rehana was 16 years old when she was married in her own village. Her husband, the only bread winner of the family, worked as a clerk in a factory in Shikarpur city. The family lived in a single room house and they did not own any land. She did the household chores. Rehana stated that she was always passionate about her education, but could not continue beyond 8th grade. As a matter of tradition, women were discouraged to go outside the house after reaching puberty. She remembers reading the newspaper whenever she found one. Her parents-in-law disliked her reading habit. Whatever spare time she had, Rehana spent gossiping with her neighbours. After two years of marriage, Rehana gave birth to a baby girl. After three years, another girl was born. This was not what her husband's family wanted. With time, her husband's attitude changed as he wanted a son. Rehana remembers, *"my husband became emotionally violent and verbally abusive. Later, he got married to another woman. He shifted his new wife and parents to Karachi, leaving me alone with my two young daughters."*



Now that her situation had totally changed, Rehana felt that she would have to work even harder to meet her daughters' needs. Through a neighbour Rehana heard that the Department of Health had job openings. Rehana applied and was selected as a Lady Health Worker. She started her work that entailed household surveys of newly born babies to administer them vaccines, and also spreading awareness about health and hygiene in the village.

Rehana said, *"I sent my daughters to the primary school in the village. When my elder daughter completed her primary education, she had to stop her education as there was no middle school in the village. The nearest middle school for girls was 10 km away."* The elder girl's father arranged her marriage in the village at a younger age, while the younger one was still studying in the primary school.

One day Rehana was conducting a survey of newly born children in the village, when she met SRSO's Social Organisers in the village who wanted to work with the local women. Rehana remembers, *"the Social Organiser said that if the women get together and make their own organisations, then SRSO will support them by enhancing their skills and improving their livelihoods through the organisation. This convinced me. But, the village women hesitated to talk to the outsiders. However, as everyone in the village knew me well as the LHW and trusted me, I took the responsibility of spreading the news among the local women. Many local women gradually understood the importance of this message and formed a Community Organisation (CO) comprising 15-20 members."*

The CO members then selected their presidents and treasurers, and SRSO conducted household surveys for assessing the poverty status of each household. Later, the poor women developed micro investment plans for their household and benefitted from many opportunities, like Community Investment Fund, loans, livestock project and Low Cost Housing Scheme. Rehana said, *"I was comparatively well off than the other females in the village because I had a job; as a salary I earned Rs. 15,000 per month. My poverty score was 24 and I was not eligible to avail CIF. However, I was encouraged by the SOs to remain member of the CO and VO. They explained to me how it will help create unity in the village, and provide us a space for discussing our issues and resolving them through discussions and joint actions."*

Rehana said, *"the village's environment was polluted and unhygienic. In line with my job description, I used to visit each household and inform them about the importance of sanitation, but none of the villagers understood or followed my messages. The stagnant water in the street, open defecation practice, and unavailability of proper drainage system always resulted in viral and bacterial diseases. Due to lack of knowledge about diseases, parents left their children playing in the muddy streets and contaminated water. Malaria and Typhoid were very common. Some of the villagers did not even allow me to administer polio drops and other vaccines to their newly born babies."*

She added that the platform of CO provided her an excellent opportunity to fulfil her duties properly. While discussing the common issues of the village during the CO meetings, she also highlighted the importance of healthy hygiene practices. *"We urgently needed an adequate, well-maintained, water supply and hygiene facility, including proper toilets and hand-washing in each household,"* she stated. Rehana said that now she has noticed a big change in the villagers' attitude towards sanitation, health and vaccination. The females in locality started cleanliness campaigns and drained the stagnant water. SRSO funded and supported the CO

members in building latrines. People have realised the importance of good hygiene for better health.

Apart from cleaning the environment, Rehana, along with her CO members, struggled for creating educational opportunities in the village. The CO and VO members, with the support of SRSO opened a Community Cluster School in the village. The school is for both, girls and boys, and classes up to grade 10 are taught. She said that her younger daughter is now able to continue her education, unlike her elder sister. As a member of the School Management Committee, Rehana visits the school on weekly basis. Rehana states,

“The women’s decision to foster Community Organisations has contributed significantly towards the development of our village. It has also helped me perform my duties in a more effective and fruitful manner, because I can communicate with large number of people in a short span of time, and because the women are more motivated and aware now. Unity is strength. All of us look forward to making further improvements in our village.”