

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.

Shabira's story: From barren land to the sky

Shabira was born in Village Amil of Shikarpur district in 1965. She was the seventh among her siblings; six sisters and three brothers. Her father had some livestock and mother was a housewife. Like other girls in the village, she did the household chores with her mother.

Shabira was 18 years old when she was married to her mother's relative who worked as a labourer on agricultural land. She started her family life in a single-room mud house. Her husband was the



eldest among his siblings. Their first child, a baby boy, was born to her after one year of marriage and died after 15 days of birth. She says, *"the baby was healthy at birth, but later he got sick and we didn't have any hospital nearby and we could not afford his treatment in the city."* Her second child was a stillborn baby.

On being asked about her early marriage life, Shabira says, *"I was a jolly woman in my village. I undertook my household work. My husband was happy with me. However, the women in my neighbourhood couldn't tolerate my happiness because their husbands were harsh with them, and they were always submissive. They blamed me for being a shameless woman, who does all the wrong things. Also, my mother in law conveyed this false information to my husband. Then my husband's attitude towards me started to change. He became harsh, and began to*

mistrust me. This made me frustrated, sad, and there was darkness around my life. I tried to kill myself several times.”

“One night my neighbours attacked me while my husband was sleeping. I ran out from the house. The community male members gathered to beat me in the name of honour. Fortunately, one of my neighbours informed the police, who rescued me. Due to trauma and sadness, I lost my unborn baby. I moved to my brothers’ place. Everyone in the neighbourhood looked down at me and considered me as a filthy being. My marriage was over. After a couple of years, my family decided to remarry me. A sympathetic man in the village married me. This man already had a wife and four sons.”

“I started my second married life living in a simple straw hut with this family. These were the hardest years of my life. I had to struggle working on other people’s land for one simple meal a day. The hut was the only asset of the family. In monsoons the rainwater trickled down on us, and in summers, it was unprotected from the scorching sun. We did not have a single tree in the vicinity. There were some bushes little behind the hut, where the family defecated. The family collected water from a joint water pump in the village. It took us an hour a day to collect a single bucket of water because we had to wait in queue to collect water. We often had fights among neighbours at the water pump.”

Shabira said that she used to have only one dress which she washed and wore throughout the year. Her husband was the only breadwinner, and he was also a daily labourer. She faced many problems, including going hungry on occasions due to shortage of food. Apart from the household chores, Shabira also worked with her husband in the landlord’s fields where they grew wheat and rice. She faced domestic violence on daily basis. *“I was tortured by my in laws. They didn’t allow me to take rest. Whenever I found some time to sit, my father-in-law would threaten me with a stick saying, ‘wake up and go, work with your husband.’”*

Shabira says that her situation worsened when she had the first child; a boy was born to her after one year of marriage. Later, with the gap of one year between every child, she had six daughters and two sons. Talking about the family size Shabira said that neither she nor her husband knew anything about family planning. The family started to have fights over limited resources and struggled to make ends meet. After sometime, Shabira’s father-in-law forced Shabira and her children out. Her husband collected straws from landlord’s fields in the village and made a straw hut for Shabira and her children in the yard.

Shabira says that she had learned to weave wooden baskets from her sister. Her husband used to accompany her for collecting branches to weave the baskets. She weaved baskets at home while her husband sold them in the market. However, this was not a sufficient source of income for the family. She says, *“there were days when we ran out of food and slept with empty stomachs. My eldest children have experienced these hardships and I still feel the pain of making them sleep hungry.”*

Shabira continued to say, *“no one in the community helped me in my bad days. Whenever I asked for help the community people refused, questioning how I will return the money when I do not have a source of income. Even my elder sister, who lived in my neighbourhood, did not talk to me. I wanted to share my sorrows with her, but her husband did not allow her to converse with me. Also, our husbands had an argument so both of us were strongly prohibited from having any sorts of communication with each other.”* Everything was gloomy in her life, but like all tragedies, better times were ahead.

Shabira, after sharing painful details about her ordeals, described the process that dramatically changed her life. *“One day the SRSO team visited our village. A female social organiser sat with us in the yard and informed us that SRSO will help us solving our problems if we organise ourselves into a Community Organisation (CO). None of us really understood why the team wanted us to form a group. However, the social organiser convinced us and we formed a group of 15 women, while some of women in the neighbourhood just observed, sitting in our meeting.”*

The newly formed CO members started meeting regularly. The meetings were facilitated by a social organiser from SRSO. In these meetings the social organiser taught the CO members about conducting meetings, keeping record of meetings, and savings. Also, the SRSO team organised sessions about family planning, hygiene and sanitation.

Shabira recalls, *“one day the social organiser came and sat down with all CO members to prepare a micro investment plan (MIP). For this MIP, each member household was asked to identify an income generating activity that they themselves could undertake. SRSO would then provide support for the identified activity through the Community Investment Fund (CIF). These CIF funds are meant to be utilised productively and then returned for revolving amongst other members.”*

Initially, CO members were reluctant to receive CIF funds. Shabira says, *“we were hesitant to receive the fund because we thought that we will be required to return the fund with an interest. We agreed to receive because the social organiser made us understand that it was interest free. This is beneficial for us because it enabled us to undertake income generating activities.”*

In 2009, Shabira received a CIF loan of Rs. 10,000. She used this amount to buy one goat for Rs. 5,000. Investment in goat proved very productive as within few months the goat gave birth to twin goatlings. She used the goat milk for domestic consumption; this added nutrients in the family’s diet.

Shabira says that with the remaining Rs. 5,000 from CIF, she prepared a small fish pond in her yard and bought feed for the fish. She says, *“fish harvesting is a labour intensive work, and we worked hard. We collected small fish from far flung areas in the village. Later I sold the fish in the village and made a profit. Within six months, I was able to return Rs. 10,000.”*

Carrying on with fish farming for two years, in 2011 Shabira again applied for and received CIF loan of Rs. 10,000. This was again invested in fish farming enterprise. After six months, this loan was repaid. Then Shabira applied for another CIF loan for Rs 12,000. She invested this loan in installing a water pump to fill up the fish pond. Shabira and her husband worked hard and are now able to generate additional income and food for the family by selling the fish.

Despite using and benefiting from CIF funds, Shabira faced a major problem after the 2010 heavy rains when her hut was severely damaged. Through CO, Shabira approached SRSO for support. Under the Low Cost Housing Scheme of the Government of Sindh, SRSO supported the construction of a two room house. Shabira and her husband worked as labourers during the construction of the house. Later, SRSO also supported them in the construction of a latrine. Today, Shabira and her family are happier, and feel secure about their shelter.

Apart from CIF and housing scheme, SRSO provided various trainings to the CO members. Shabira received Traditional Birth Attendants training facilitated by SRSO. Later, Shabira

became a government employee at the Basic Health Centre in her village. Shabira earns Rs. 14,000 per month as salary. She visits homes and give instructions to villagers about sanitation and maternal health.

Shabira was always thinking about her children's future as well. She decided to send the youngest two to school to get education. It was not possible for her to educate her elder children because of financial issues. Now, as she has diversified sources of income, she can spend money on her children's well-being.

Not only did joining the CO improve her economic well-being, it also had a huge impact on her social well-being. Now her villagers look up to her whenever they need help. Her sister, who did not talk to her, is now her good friend. She says,

"I was bare footed on a barren land. SRSO has held me up to touch the sky."