

## 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.

### Zari's potentials unleashed by social mobilisation

Zari, 52, was born and raised in Birkhan village of Shikarpur district. She was the eldest of her five siblings; two brothers and three sisters. Her family lived in a single room mud house. Her parents worked as labourers on a landlord's farm. She narrated that her father was suffering from chronic Tuberculosis, and he was unable to fulfil the household's needs. She remembers that her family was always in economic crises. She has seen her mother struggling to earn a livelihood for the family. She narrated that apart from household chores and farming, her mother worked as a cleaner in a landlord's house, a baby sitter, and also made homemade



remedy products to fulfil the family needs. She said, *“my mother used to fight whenever we cried with an empty stomach. She scolded us saying, your father is unable to earn, so from where I will bring money to buy things for you.”* She learned to stitch clothes, weave *Charpai* [bunks] and make *Pranda* [a decoration for bridal tassel] from her neighbours.

She says, *“I learned stitching clothes from a neighbour. I did not have a sewing machine, scissor and other tools used for stitching at home. Neither the family had enough money to*

*buy these things for me, nor did I ask for them. I used our neighbour's hay mower to cut the fabric and stitched it with a needle by hand."*

She got married to her cousin at the age of 13. She said, *"as a gift from my parents I was given two dresses on my departure with my husband. My mother rented the bridal jewellery for the wedding night."*

She started her married life in a straw hut with the husband's family; parents in law and three brothers in law. Her husband was the eldest among his siblings and he was a gambling addict. Her father-in-law was an old man, who could not work and mother in law worked as cleaner in neighbouring houses to earn a living for the family. After five years of marriage, she gave birth to a baby girl. Later, with the gap of one year between each child she had eight children; five daughters and three sons.

She did all household chores while her mother in law worked outside as maid. She said that she has seen some days when the family begged for a single meal a day from neighbours. She said that she needed resources to feed her children but she did not have a source. One day she visited a neighbour's house to see her neighbour, who was suffering from an illness. She saw the neighbour had a sewing machine. She borrowed the machine for a couple of days. She started to stitch dresses as she knew the art from her childhood. She charged Rs. 50 per suit. However, she discounted for the ones who could not afford Rs. 50. She said that the customers who could not pay me in cash, paid me in the form of goods, like wheat or rice flour. This way she collected Rs. 375 and purchased the sewing machine from her neighbour.

Now, as Zari owned the sewing machine, she became confident to look for other sources of income. She borrowed a baby buffalo from her neighbour to look after. She charged hay for stitching clothes from some of her customers. When the baby buffalo grew up healthy, the owner sold it out for Rs. 25,000. She received Rs. 10,000 from this amount for looking after the buffalo. With this money she constructed Damp-Proof-Course (DPC/foundation) of a room. She along with her mother in law collected broken bricks from the vicinity. She took loan of Rs. 2,000 from the brick maker and bought bricks to construct the house. She narrated that she paid the loan in several instalments. It took them four years to build the house. The family moved out from the straw hut to the room. She made the house but the household necessities were still needed. She fed her children with *Lassi* and rice that her neighbours provided as alms on daily basis and she remained hungry on the days when they had less food.

One day, unfortunately, Zari became ill and she went to the hospital for her check-up. She heard some patients gossiping about Sindh Rural Support Organisation (SRSO) that wanted to work with poor women. Later, the news spread throughout the village that this organisation wants to work with females only. This agitated the local men.

Zari narrated that SRSO staff kept roaming around in streets but none of the villagers allowed them to interact with their females. The rich ones in the village suggested the Social Organisers from SRSO to visit the poor families, because they will allow them to interact with their families. When the poor interacted with the social organisers, the rich ones looked down at them. She remembers vividly, *"the village men looked down at us because we talked to strangers which was considered as causing shame for our men. One of the village man named Muhammad Edan allowed the social organisers to conduct a meeting at his house where they met few of us. I secretly attended the meeting and when I came back, I heard people taunting me, "has the time finally come for you to read and write, and attend meetings?" Men at my*

*home scolded me saying, what other village men will think of us? My husband got angry at me because some village men asked him, as a taunt, to wear bangles and stay at home. "Your wife is now moving around in the city for meetings", they told him. Some village men even warned us that they will exclude us from the community [if we didn't stop attending the meetings]. Listening to these all comments our men got angry at us, but they had trust on us, so they did not refrain us from going to the meetings. Also, I had convinced my family well after attending the first meeting. I told them that SRSO will turn out to be beneficial for the family. Hence, as per the social organisers' directions, we formed a Community Organisation (CO) consisting of 12 women in 2009. We named our CO as Noor, the Arabic word for light."*

The CO Noor started to have weekly meetings facilitated by social organisers from SRSO. She said that she attended all the meetings where she learned to introduce herself, listen to others' opinions, share her problems, and saving money. She said, *"returning from meeting to home, men started to taunt me. When I passed by them in the streets, they started to do 'slow claps', saying, 'now Zari will earn money and her husband will stay at home wearing her bangles.'* However, I ignored this behaviour of the villagers."

*"Observing our meetings, other women in the village, who previously refused to become members, also showed their willingness to make COs. Now, CO Noor has 20 members. In the beginning we had only four COs in the village. Later, fourteen COs were formed. We selected our presidents and treasurers. The presidents and treasurers from all COs met in Village Organisation (VO). Now, as we were organised, well in COs, and the presidents were able to conduct meetings, they kept records of the meetings. SRSO started to provide us with benefits.*

Zari said that after the VO was formed, she was asked by the Social Organiser to fill a form and make Micro Investment Plan for her household. In this plan she showed her interest in buying a sewing machine for her daughter. Her daughter had learnt stitching clothes from her, but due to lack of capital she could not use her potential. As her poverty score was below 18, she was given a loan of Rs. 5,000. With this money she bought a sewing machine for her daughter. Her daughter started to stitch clothes for the villagers and paid the CIF loan within one year. She said that, later, her daughter contributed to the family income and helped her siblings get better food to eat and clothes to wear. Zari said, *my daughter also saved money in CO account for her marriage. However, the money was saved because SRSO linked us to Hidayat Trust, who sponsored my daughter's marriage expenditures."*

In the year 2010, she got Traditional Birth Attendant training provided by SRSO. She volunteered for a year at the Basic Health Centre in the village. Later, in the same year she was appointed as permanent staff as a government employee. She started to earn Rs. 14,000 as monthly salary.

In 2011, she applied for and received another loan of Rs. 10,000 from the CIF. With this money she bought sugar for her son's marriage. She narrated that, *"I invited all villagers at my son's wedding. As a tradition of the village, I distributed a cup of sugar to each invitee and everyone gifted me Rs. 100 – 300. This way I gained a profit of Rs.10, 000 apart from the premium. I used this profit to fulfil the rest of needs at the wedding. I returned the money later by stitching clothes."*

In 2011, SRSO, through its Low Cost Housing Scheme, built a two-room house shelter for her family. She narrated that her previous house was in miserable condition and it was close to collapse. The roof was very weak and the family lived in the house at high risk.

Apart from self-improvement, Zari has also proved herself as a humanitarian during 2010 flood in interior Sindh by working in a hospital on volunteer basis. She was the only woman from the CO who contributed her services in flood affected areas. Also, Zari has been supporting her CO members in their illness. She administers vaccines free of cost. She encourages the community members for regular medical check-ups, and also provides free of cost delivery support to them.

Zari bought a donkey cart for her elder son, who is also able to contribute to the family's income. The other son works as labourer on farms owned by other people. She has taught her two daughters stitching clothes and embroidery art. They are now able to earn money by stitching clothes and selling embroidered work. They are saving money for their own marriage.

She has a dream to educate all her grandchildren, to see them having a better life. She envisages their life with all basic needs and free of difficulties that she had faced.

Talking about her life before the formation of CO, Zari said, *"when people face hardships they become feeble. Even men commit suicide when they can't afford taking care of their family. I never gave up. I struggled throughout those difficult years. I could not educate my children because I was barely able to feed them once a day. I remember the days when I just wanted to take a permanent exit from life, but I gave myself hundreds of reasons to live. All those bad experiences have weakened me down, but they have also taught me that life is all about ups and downs. Staying on the course is the key. In the downs one should not give up. Rather, we should work with dedication and commitment."* Zari Says,

*"I faced all the difficulties with courage and this CO appeared in my life as a source of happiness. Today, I do not ask for food from the villagers. I never had tea in my house once. Today, I have all household accessories and food items stored for the year. The community men salute me to show respect. Today, I am happy."*