

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.

Abida Khatoon's story of resilience and empowerment

Abida Khatoon, 32, was born in Boriri village of Shikarpur district. She was the youngest of five siblings. Her father had a tea stall in the village. He earned a little amount of money whenever he got some customers, which was not enough most of the time. Also, the family had four buffaloes and some agricultural land where they grew rice and wheat. In her childhood, she saw her parents working in their fields. She remembers her childhood as the happiest days of her life when she did not have to think about household needs. The family lived in a two-room mud house and was economically sound.



Abida was only 13 years old when she was married off to her cousin. Her father passed away in the same year. Her husband was the fourth out of his 14 siblings; seven sisters and seven brothers. She started her married life in a mud house with the joint family. After three years of her marriage, she gave birth to a baby girl. Later, with a gap of two years between every child she had another daughter and a son. She said that she lived happily with the family and her husband was cooperative and helpful. However, the scenario changed when her husband's two sisters, who were married to her brothers, started arguments over ownership

of the property. Abida's brothers did not want to divide the property; rather they wanted to live jointly. However, her sisters in law did not tolerate each other in the same house. Observing this, her husband tortured her demanding her brothers divide their property and give Abida's share to her.

Abida narrated her ordeal, *"my husband became violent. He started to hit me. Seeing this, my brothers also restricted their wives to the house. This ignited my husband's anger and he increased physical and mental torture. Then he divorced me. "My husband took away my two children from me, but the youngest daughter is with me because she was just a few months old at the time of divorce. I started to live with my youngest brother along with his wife, four children, my mother and mother's sister, who was a widow and lived with us. In inheritance my brother received four Kanals (half an acre) of land, where he grew rice and wheat. He sold the surplus to meet other household needs."*

"After four years of my divorce, my youngest brother died of a heart attack. With the death of the family's only bread winner we became vulnerable. Trauma about the uncertain future and sadness of brother's death made us all feeble. However, we did not give up. We had five children in the family, so we had to work to earn for their survival. We started to make traditional hats, my sister in law could stitch clothes and I learned from her. Also, we continued farming our land. We faced days when the family had nothing to eat. As the basic diet was very poor, I became very weak and would often fall down, having no stamina. In times of sickness we had to sell our stored food to get some treatment, remaining hungry for days, sometimes weeks. I usually thought, "Oh Allah, how will we survive this long journey of life." The situation was so gloomy."

She added, *"one day the school master in our neighbourhood visited us and told my mother to attend a meeting in the village school. The next day she went to the meeting and came back with news that people from SRSO named organisation have come to make Tanzeem. She said that she did not understand all the things they said. She asked me to attend the next meeting whenever it would happen."*

After a week the SRSO team visited the village again in the year 2011. Abida said, *"I attended the meeting and learned that the team will only work with women. Initially they asked us to make six groups, so in my group there were 15 women. They told us that this group will be your Tanzeem (Community Organisation-CO). Furthermore, they told us that you have to nurture your CO just like your children. They said that through this CO you can begin to improve your livelihoods. We named the newly formed CO as Rabeel, because Rabeel is a name of the flower that spreads fragrance in its surroundings."*

Observing these activities, the men in the village lost their cool, and expressed their anger, many a time through violence within the household. They prohibited us from getting together for meetings. The village men said, *"household chores and farming is the only suitable activity for women. If they attend meetings and start moving around, they will forget the norms and traditions of our village."*

Abida narrated in length about how she had witnessed women go through physical and mental abuse in the village community since her childhood. They used to kill women in the name of honour. She has seen cases where men stoned women to death. They killed women as brutally, and as casually, as killing a fly. At the household level, the men yelled at their females, hit them and dominated all household decisions. Men never allowed their women

to go out from the premises of their houses. They even admonished them for going to the hospital to seek treatment.

Abida went on to add, "however with the repeated visits by the SRSO Social Organisers to the village, the village men became more cautious. They started to stop us from attending meetings. Many times we cancelled the CO meetings, but we met whenever we found a slot of time free from men's influence. Once, when one of our CO members was sick, we went to her house for the meeting and told our men that we went to see the sick neighbour. This way the CO members continued meeting by making excuses at home."

"SRSO team asked us to open an account in a bank, to help us save our money in a bank. Also, through this bank we would be able to withdraw loans. We were confused, because we had never stepped out of the village boundaries. The SRSO team helped in the opening and operating a bank account. SRSO distributed loans to the needy CO members. When women received loans and made good use of them to get benefits for the household members, their menfolk finally began to recognise the benefit of CO and began to trust their women."

Abida said that after the formation of CO Rabeel, her household, like others in the village, also prepared a Micro Investment Plan. In this plan, she had indicated that she has the skills to raise livestock but since she did not have capital she could not utilise her skills. Given that her poverty score was less than 18, Abida requested for a loan of Rs 18,000 from the Community Investment Fund (CIF) being managed by the Village Organisation. Abida received the loan in 2012. Abida and her sister in law (who also received Rs 18,000) pooled the amount and bought a young buffalo. Abida said that previously either they dumped or gave the hay to neighbours, but now they could utilise the hay to feed their own buffalo. Further, her mother and mother's sister looked after the buffalo and it grew healthy. Abida and her sister in law returned the loan by selling their handmade crafts and stitching villagers' clothes. Abida said that after 10 months they sold the buffalo and bought a pregnant one. After six months the new buffalo gave birth to a calf. The milk produced by the buffalo was used for domestic consumption, as well as sold in the market. She learned that by investing in the buffalo, she was able to fulfil her household food consumption needs and also generated financial asset, as she sold milk and continued to save a small amount with CO.

In 2013, Abida applied for and received another CIF loan of Rs. 22,000 from the VO. She sold the buffalo calf and added the amount to the loan and bought another pregnant buffalo. She carried on selling milk and was able to return the loan within six months. She sold the offspring and saved more money. In 2014, Abida took another CIF loan of Rs. 22,000. Adding this amount to her savings, she bought another buffalo. She returned the loan within one year by selling milk. Within a period of few years, Abida's family is a proud owner of three buffaloes and one calf. This progress, Abida says, was unimaginable before the CO formation.

On a personal level, she strived against the odds to become a member of the CO. She was very keen to attend meetings, learn new things and take benefits from the CO activities. She said that once she was threatened by her own uncle that if she ever goes to the CO meetings again he will cut her legs. She said that she left the CO for a couple of months because she was frightened by the threat. She used to feel very insecure and scared. However, as her economic status improved her uncle's anger cooled. As a member of local Village Organisation, Abida also became a member of the local LSO. Abida said that by attending LSO meetings she further developed her skills and confidence, and today she is a member of the LSO Board.

Abida said, *“the LSO meetings built confidence in me. Parveen, a Social Organiser from SRSO, used to visit the village to facilitate the CO meetings. She was the one who consoled me and taught me to be brave. Observing the SRSO team members, I also wanted to be bold like them, to work like they do. They inspired me to learn. They told me about my rights. I took admission in Adult Education Centre, an education programme of the Government of Pakistan. When I started attending the school people mocked at me saying ‘now this old lady will get education’. But I ignored their comments. I was a quick learner because I had studied till grade five before. I completed grade eight from this school. Afterwards, I continued studying in the high school in the village. I will sit for matriculation exam next year.”*

Further, she has also worked with different organisations, including as a promoter of family planning with Greenstar Social Marketing, a volunteer with Save the Children - International NGO - on family planning component with a monthly stipend of Rs. 1,500. Currently, Abida is working as Community Health Worker (CHW) in her village under the USAID’s Health Communication Programme implemented by RSPN/SRSO. Abida is covering a population of about 1,000 people. Within this, there are 140 Married Women of Reproductive Age (MWRA). Abida played a leading role in setting up Community Support Group (CSG) with the support of CO and Village Health Committee (VHC) with the support of VO. Abida registered all the pregnant women in her catchment area and regularly undertakes household visits to advise them about the importance of pre-natal check-ups, nutrition, and immunisation of pregnant women and young children. Abida receives a monthly stipend of Rs. 3,000. Also, she has become an active member of the LSO; last year she was selected as the General Secretary of LSO.

Abida has learned to fight for her rights. She said that at the time of divorce, her husband took two children: a son and a daughter away from her, and shifted to Karachi. He did not allow her to meet her children and also wanted to snatch the youngest daughter who lives with Abida. She did not meet her children for seven years because she was afraid and was unable to go to Karachi. However, today she is bold, she has money and she knows that it is her right to meet her children; she visits her children twice a month.

Talking about her achievements, Abida says that her family’s economic situation is now much better. They have been able to mobilise assets worth hundreds of thousands of rupees. Her family’s livelihoods trajectory is improving. The family is now more secure, and looks forward to continuing this trajectory. Apart from improving her livelihoods means, Abida has also grown very confident. She has developed new sets of managerial skills. As the General Secretary of LSO, Abida now has more responsibilities, and in order to fulfil these she has the support of her fellow LSO members. On a personal note, Abida said that once when she was hospitalised and needed an operation, fellow LSO women members took the responsibility and signed the payment guarantee form.

Abida concludes her story by saying, *“my life has seen a revolution within a short span of time. I am grateful to the CO, VO and LSO members for trusting me. Most of all I want to thank SRSO for bringing an approach to us that allowed us to unleash the potential that would have remained dormant forever. We had the potential; SRSO supported us to harness it.”*