

Breaking the Cycle of Poverty – Household Cases Studies from Rawalpindi and Swabi Districts

‘Breaking the Cycle of Poverty’ is a series of household case studies from Rawalpindi and Swabi districts. The case studies contain information about how National Rural Support Programme (NRSP) has worked with poor households and communities to improve people's lives and livelihoods. These household case studies have been carried out to document and present NRSP's contributions. The household case studies also reflect upon the nature of the problems that the people have faced, and how social guidance from NRSP contributed to improve their lives.

These household case studies conclusively demonstrate the value of the social mobilisation approach to capacitating poor people to improve their own lives and livelihoods. More than just economics, the approach also makes meaningful contribution to changing the local social norms that allow the poor, particularly the women, more social space and legitimacy to play a greater role in their own development and in harnessing their own potential.

This is one such household case study that shows the positive social and economic change brought about through the good work of NRSP.

Case Study No. 6/9: Mrs. Zeenat

Village: Jahangirpura, UC: Karnal Sher Kalay (KSK), Tehsil: Razan, District: Sawabi

By Kulsoom Masood Rehman

“Stargey e rabande bande kre o charta e botlu,” (They blindfolded me and took me somewhere) says Zeenat, a 39 years old from Swabi district, while narrating a horrifying story from her life, who was born and grew up in Jahangirpura. From the day she gained her senses, Zeenat has only faced anger, despair and heard the crying of her mother as she slept, wetting her pillow. Zeenat’s was a family of four sisters and one brother. Her parents were uneducated and so were her siblings, and she too did not attend school. For them, education was like a luxury that they could just not afford. One can imagine a family where the next day’s meal is always doubtful, how could they have even thought of sending their children to the school? The income was never sufficient for a family of seven. Her father had a broken cycle with him and used to collect old junk pieces of metal and wood from different houses and sell them. That was their only way of income. Her brothers were also not so active and aware, and they used to sit all day at the house, fighting with each other. Her brothers used to go to the nearby town in search of mundane jobs but mostly returned back disappointed. Some days, fate would smile for them and her brothers would earn some money by working as labourers in the nearby shops under constructions, but this would only happen once or twice a month for them. Other days were filled with deprivation, sorrow and curse words.



Zeenat was twelve years old when her maternal uncle died and left three daughters and two sons. Surrendering completely to emotions, Zeenat’s mother decided to get her married to her dead brother’s eldest son. “Da zama da ror nakhay dee” (they are the last assets of my brother) , this is what

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her mother was thinking and at the age of 12, her mother got Zeenat married to her 30 years old cousin. With teary eyes and heavy voice, Zeenat recalled the initial 14 years of her life. Since her mother-in-law, after the death of her spouse married her late husband's brother. Her new husband used to beat her and Zeenat a lot. Zeenat's own husband was helpless and he could only watch her mother and wife getting ruthlessly beaten up by his new father. Her husband had four siblings of his own and four other step-siblings. They used to make Zeenat work from day to night like a robot. She used to do all the household chores as well as helped her husband in his work. Her husband was a butcher and Zeenat, along with him, used to cut the meat, clean animal skin and melt fats for him to sell in the market. The only time she got to rest was when she slept at night.

For a woman, after her husband, the biggest happiness and support are her children. But Zeenat was really unfortunate as she did not get to see this blessing for about 14 years of her married life. Every time when she was expecting, her father-in-law beat her so hard that she used to have a miscarriage due to it. Zeenat had six miscarriages and she grew weaker and weaker day by day. One family had moved into the neighbourhood and a lady from that family used to observe her daily life conditions. One day, she came to her house and tried to make a conversation with her. With passing time, they became good friends and Zeenat got the confidence to talk to her in-laws about moving out of the house. After a lot of arguments and quarrels, she was able to get a place of her own by selling a small piece of land given to her husband by his father. This whole process took them one year and their house was ready for them to live in. She moved in but soon she realized that butchery will not be enough to run the whole house. Along with her husband's butchery, she started a small business of selling clothes. She used to bring clothes from the nearby towns like Gaju Khan, Shireen Kot and Nowshehra, and sold them in her neighbourhood. During this time, she was blessed with two sons and one abnormal daughter. Though it was difficult to make the both ends meet, especially by the middle of every month, but they were living a peaceful life comparatively. She developed a good friendship with a woman named Khalida during her small business transactions. Khalida used to bring clothes for Zeenat and showed her other shops where she could get clothes from. She was really happy and contended with everything, but she did not know what catastrophe was waiting for her.

Khalida has secretly made a deal with a group of people and had sold Zeenat to them for about Rs 150,000 (USD 1,500). "Stargey e rabande bande kre o charta e botlu"(They blind-folded me and took us somewhere) said Zeenat while describing her kidnapping as she was leaving for a relative's house and the same group of people took her and her youngest child somewhere far. No one in their neighbourhood knew where they went. The villagers made up stories and told Zeenat's husband that she might have run away with some other, rich guy. But Zeenat and her son were held captive, both separately, for about 11 days in a big bungalow. They asked Zeenat to get married with one of their men but she refused as she was married already. They beat Zeenat up to the extent that her clothes were torn. She would not sleep at night due to the fear of her honour being lost and the thoughts of her son being held captive in some other room.

Right after nine days of her kidnapping, one day she was tied in the balcony of the bungalow where she saw a number of girls going to someone's house. They exchanged smiles and she called one girl inside the house. That girl easily got into the house because she knew the people. On seeing Zeenat's terrifying condition, she asked her who she was and Zeenat told her the whole story. That girl ensured Zeenat that she would help her and her son get out of the house through her brother who was a lawyer. As soon as the lawyer came to know of the whole incident, he decided to go to that bungalow and meet Zeenat. Very cleverly he entered the house and started a conversation with the people there as he saw a badly wounded lady cleaning the floors. He guessed that it must be her and as soon the

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house owners were not there anymore, he talked to her and told her that he would get her out. Next day, he brought about Rs 100,000 (USD 1,000) and arranged a meeting with the kidnapers. He ensured them that he will call Zeenat's relatives, get her divorced and then they can arrange a marriage for her and one of their men. For surety purpose, he gave that money to them and took Zeenat, and her son with him by telling them that till her relatives come here, she will stay at his place. By the stroke of midnight, in the security of two other cars, Zeenat and her son were taken back to their house. The lawyer himself went with them to tell the villagers that Zeenat was a woman of honour and she did not run away with any man. But who could stop the villagers from spreading shameful rumours? Even Zeenat's own husband did not believe her and he started taking drugs. For about two years, Zeenat and her children survived on her husband's meagre income through butchery but he got more involved into taking drugs and was not able to work anymore. The neighbours used to give some amount of food to Zeenat and her children and which she even stored for later days, but even that did not work for long.

Those days, NRSP team members were going from home to home to create awareness about a workshop being held for women on health and hygiene. They also went to Zeenat's house but were not able to make a conversation with her. That horrible incident of Zeenat's life had taken away all the courage from her and she could not face any people any more. Talking to new people scared her as she did not come out of her house for about two years after her kidnapping. LSO's (Local Support Organization) president, Mrs. Nageena came to know about Zeenat's situation through other NRSP staff members and decided to go to her house. She tried talking to her and encouraged her to come out of the house and attend the workshops. She thought that through going to these workshops Zeenat would start interacting with other females and gain some confidence to face the world once again. It was a difficult process as one day Zeenat would go and the other day she would not due to the frightening memories of her kidnapping. Her son who was also kidnapped along with her had become a mental patient. He would get up in his sleep and scream. Her husband was a complete drug addict now and Zeenat had no other option but to step out of her house. Through these workshops and attending the CO (Community Organization) meetings, she gained a lot of self-esteem and started thinking of other constructive ways of removing her financial constraints. Zeenat, after becoming a member of CO, took a CIF (Community Investment Fund) loan of Rs. 10,000 (USD 100). She bought a sewing machine and started making clothes for the villagers living nearby. She had learned this from her mother and wanted to put this skill to use. It was easy for her because she did not have to go out of the house for this. The villagers started appreciating her skills and the demand increased. With the money collected from sewing clothes and another CIF loan together, she bought a small shop for her middle child where he sells cell phones. With hers and her son's income, they were able to return the loan. The shop got bigger as her son got more items like CD disks, USBs and Hardware drives for selling. Zeenat's son who got kidnapped also started becoming mentally better and sometimes used to work with his brother in the shop. Currently, Zeenat brings clothes from the nearby towns for selling purposes, she also sews occasionally and her son's shop has gotten even bigger with more items in it. She confidently deals with the shopkeepers; the memories still haunt her but she knows she is the only way through which her children can have a bright future. Her eldest son completed this intermediate (grade 12), the middle one is in the tenth grade. She also takes care of her drug addicted husband; tried to send him for rehabilitation and also her abnormal daughter. Zeenat has thought of taking another CIF loan and combine it with her and her son's income to get another story build up on their house. She would then give it out on rent and with that money she wants her son to complete at least 16 years of education.

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Even now, Zeenat's eyes get filled with tears when she recalls whatever had happened with her and her family. Those times when she had completely given up and could not confront the world anymore, NRSP gave her the confidence to stand up and change hers, and her family's fate. Through the management skills that she learned at NRSP's workshops, she was able to strategically use the total income for her household as well as her children's education. The woman who had decided to live the rest of her life inside one room, who was scared of facing the people and was haunted by the memories of her kidnapping is now the President of the VO (Village Organization) and the VO members are also helping her husband in rehabilitation. She says NRSP has done what even her own family could not have done for her. She always looks up to NRSP for assistance and is never disappointed. Together with the president of LSO, she has decided to foster 112 CO's especially for the females of her area. She is an epitome of bravery for the whole village and the women look up to her for assistance. Women empowerment is one of the critical issues of Pakistan and fundamental aims of NRSP, and NRSP will continue to make differences in many lives.

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