

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. 7/9: Mrs. Shameena

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

By Kulsoom Masood Rehman

Shameena, 38 years old, opened her eyes in a house where nobody was sure if they will get a meal even once a day. Born and brought up in Jalal Abad, Shameena is a sister to four more sisters and seven brothers. Their poverty never let them spend a single penny on education. Her parents were uneducated too and father was the only bread-winner of the family. He used to take care of the lands of big landowners and whatever he earned got



Shameena's shop

them one time's meal only. There was no concept of family planning and so their family members kept on increasing until they were a family of 14 people. That family lived in that house made up of straws, had two rooms and one self-made toilet; “more of a whole in the ground” said Shameena sarcastically.

Her uncles and aunts had got married earlier and were not on really good terms with them due to their poverty. Her brothers somehow managed to go to the government schools that were free of cost and did matriculation (grade 10). But the sisters could not do so. Sending a girl to the school was unacceptable to them. Their men could not tolerate other men looking at the ladies of their house while they went to the school and so the doors of education were closed for them forever. All the sisters were elder than the brothers and got married one by one to the men that were double their ages. In most of the families of her village, daughters were treated like an outsider from the day they were born because it was believed that they will get married eventually and be someone else's property. Therefore, not much heed was paid to their needs and whenever they find it appropriate, they would get a small girl married to a man of any age just to get rid of her responsibilities.

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Shameena's parents had the same mentality and so, 16 years old Shameena was married off to a 35 years old man.

Shameena was not expecting much from her married life because she knew the conditions of her in-laws. Her father-in-law was dead and her husband was the only source of income for the family as he was the eldest among his siblings. He worked as a mechanic in a workshop on the main road of Swabi in which he had a small share. She used to do almost all the household chores because her sister-in-laws, three in number, were very young and did not take much interest in the work. She had two brother-in-laws who used to go to the nearby town daily in search of jobs but their fate was as dark as their house at night without any electricity. Shameena was used to doing the household chores at her mother's house so this thing did not trouble her much. In the coming years, she was blessed with three sons and three daughters. The eldest son was going to school as well as working part-time with his father at the workshop. Shameena took care of her husband's siblings just like she did of her own children. She was like a mother to them. Life was not a bed of roses but things were not that bad until one day when Shameena heard the news of an accident that had occurred at her husband's workshop.

A petrol tank blast had taken place near the workshop. The workshop windows were shattered and broken into splinters and flew in the air, right into her husband's whole body. Her son, who was working with his father in the shop, fell into the nearby drain and was saved from serious injuries. But Shameena's husband was in a bad condition. His clothes were torn and he was clad with blood. As soon as Shameena reached the shop, they had taken out her son from the drain and covered her husband in clothes. The whole shop was destroyed. They took the injured to the nearby government hospital. Whatever Shameena had saved from her husband's income, everything was spent on her husband's and son's treatment. Her son got recovered soon but her husband required proper surgery. A small piece of glass was stuck inside at the back side of his head, near the brain, due to which he had almost become a mental patient. Shameena, due to financial constraints, was not able to get her husband to a private hospital for proper treatment. The coming years were even harder as her three brother-in-laws, who were now working as labours got married and had families of their own. Due to the daily quarrels over money and children, all three of them left the house with their families and started a life of their own. Shameena now lived with a disable husband, old mother-in-law and six children.

Those days, the LSO's (Local Support Organization) President, Mrs. Nageena, was doing a survey in the village for a newly started project known as "WISE" by NRSP. This project made sure that places like streets, kitchens and toilets are clean in the houses, and that people wash their hands after doing any kind of work. Soaps were being distributed in the houses. And this is how she came to know about Shameena's house. Shameena, engulfed into her sorrows and tragedies of her life had no idea about the variety of development plans that NRSP was implementing in that area. LSO President took her to a few CO (Community Organization) meetings where she came to know about the CIF (Community Investment Fund) loan and decided to become the member of CO to avail this opportunity. By attending the workshops arranged by the LSO office, she found new ways of removing financial constraints of her house.

She got a CIF loan of Rs 10,000 (USD 100) and started a small 'Lady's Shop' inside her house. She used to sell feminine products at her house and since the women were hesitant in getting such things from the male shopkeepers, they all used to come to her shop. This was a really good start for her shop and in the beginning months she was able to get one time's meal for her house members as well as returned the loan. After that she got another Rs 20,000 (USD 200) loan and built a bigger shop in her

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house. It had become like a general store where all kinds of feminine products as well as household use items were also available. As soon as she expanded her shop, more and more women came and her business flourished. People now gave her orders to bring specific things from the nearby town and she took the delivery charges also. This way she was able to return the second loan also.

From the income of her shop, she opened a small mechanic shop for her eldest son as he had learned skills from his father. Both the shops started earning enough for them to have a decent meal twice a day and proper, clean clothes for wearing. In about four years, Shameena was able to gather enough money to get her three sister-in-laws and one daughter married. Those were the marriages which the villagers still quote in examples because she, alone, arranged everything for the girls from her shop; things like bangles, cosmetics, households, utensils, and organized a decent wedding for them. Currently, her two sons and daughters are going to schools and colleges. Shameena would not compromise on her children's education because she herself has realized what difficulties she faced because of being uneducated.

She says that her girls would at least do their intermediate (grade 12) and after that it is up to them if they want to get married, run the shop with their mother or study further. She gives equal importance to her daughters and sons and believes in the gender equality. She has now applied for CIF loan so she can start her husband's treatment in a good hospital. She believes that her husband's disability can be cured if treated properly. Shameena is thankful to her fellow CO members, LSO leaders and NRSP for giving her not only hopes but sources too for living a better life. Together with NRSP's assistance and the income from her shop, she plans to educate her children as well as help other females in the village who are hesitant to talk about their problems.

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