



## Programme Introduction

In 2008, Mr Shoab 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 Jacobabad 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 such community member 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.

### Case Study 13 of 15: Ms. Rukhsana

*By Savaila Hunzai*

Ms. Rukhsana, 35 years old, is a resident of village Manu Goth of Jacobabad district. Her father farmed his land and mother was a housewife, who also looked after the family's livestock. Her childhood was like that of any other village child. Being the first born in a traditional household, she performed most of the domestic chores. "Apart from attending the village primary school, I



looked after my young siblings while my mother made embroidered hats, Rillis (traditional floor/wall covering) and headscarves for sale," Rukhsana said. She had just passed her grade five, when her family decided to marry her to one of her cousins. She explained, "We were often told that it is a sin for the family if their girls do not get married at young age." As a matter of tradition, her parents gave her some gold jewellery pieces in her dowry.

Unlike her parents, Rukhsana's husband's family did not own any land. They lived in a joint family in a two-room mud house. The family worked as tenants on a landlord's land. Her  
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husband worked as tailor. He also allowed her to fulfil her desire of getting education. She studied at home and completed her matriculation. Rukhsana said that after completion of her matriculation, she gave birth to a baby girl. Later, with the gap of two years between each child, she had seven children: five daughters and two sons. She said that she had five consecutive daughters, but she wanted to have a son; therefore, she continued giving births until she finally had two sons. "To gain respect in the family, every daughter-in-law must have a son. Till today, we believe that having a son is compulsory else the husband, in desire of a baby boy, will remarry", Rukhsana said.

Talking about traditional norms for women in her village, Rukhsana said, "After a certain age limit, females were expected to stay at home and do household chores. Both men and women did not believe that girls should work outside the home. Likewise, I internalised the social norm of behaving as a woman by staying within the borders of house, doing the household chores and looking after children. While our men worked outside and dealt with important issues relating to family income and took all the decisions including household needs and purchases, we just stayed silent."

The family's household economy began to deteriorate when Rukhsana's father-in-law suffered from a severe illness. The family faced a huge financial crisis and even had to sell their house. The family became homeless and Rukhsana said that she returned to her parents' house with her children. She said that her husband, who earlier stitched dresses for the villagers, had sold his sewing machine and had become unemployed. The growing children's needs caused her mental stress.

Rukhsana said that her husband then began to work as a labourer, but the wage was not sufficient and they had to take loans from the relatives to fulfil their daily needs. Meanwhile, she found a job with government's Polio team and worked for four days a month as a field staff. She earned Rs. 150 a day as her salary that helped her to meet some of family's basic needs.

Rukhsana's mother-in-law had saved jewellery that her parents had gifted her. She collaborated with her mother-in-law and sold their pooled jewellery for Rs. 70,000 to build a single-room mud house on a small plot of land that the landlord had granted them. She said, "We built the shelter to keep our children, but we could barely afford two meals a day. We asked our relatives and neighbours for Lassi (butter milk) and we ate mustard, chili or any other vegetable in meal."

One day the landlord of the village introduced SRSO's team to conduct a survey in the village. Rukhsana said that she registered her family for the survey. After the registration was over, the team revisited the village and collaborated with the landlord to foster Community Organisations. Rukhsana heard the landlord saying, "My family's females will not participate in any of the activities outside the house, but you can work with the poor, who will allow their females to interact with you."

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The SRSO team started to visit the local settlements. Rukhsana said, "I had heard that the organisation will work only with women. However, outsiders were never welcomed at our houses and women were not allowed to interact with outsiders; therefore, I visited the unit office to get information about their programme. I learned that SRSO supports local women to get organised and then in reducing their poverty. The only condition was that the women should agree to get organised in groups and collaborate among themselves to work in harmony."

Rukhsana returned to her settlement and discussed about SRSO's programme with other local women. Her neighbours agreed to get organised, but they were initially hesitant because their men would not allow them to interact with outsiders. She took the responsibility of getting information from SRSO team as she already was in contact with them. In 2009, she along with her neighbouring women formed a Community organisation (CO) of 20 members and invited a female staff to meet the CO members. The SRSO's Social Organiser mediated their meeting and encouraged them to spread the word in other women in the village.

Rukhsana being the only educated and active member was selected by the CO members to lead them as their president. She stated that she received training regarding the CO meetings, record keeping and saving. Rukhsana started her monthly meetings with the CO members. SRSO provided vocational training to the CO members. She learned stitching clothes in one of the training sessions she attended. She said that they discussed their problems with the SO in their meetings. Then the SO guided them further to pass resolution to the SRSO for the support.

In the 2010 flood, while their settlement located on a higher ground remained safe, the villagers' agricultural land was flooded and the flood water remained stagnant for months. This also spread viral diseases in children and they also lost their livestock. Seeking support from SRSO, the CO members passed a resolution for CIF loans. SRSO requested the CO members to fill forms for Micro Investment Plan (MIP) for their households. Rukhsana applied for a CIF loan through her MIP. In her MIP, she mentioned her desire of buying a sewing machine to utilise her stitching skills. She received a CIF loan of Rs. 10,000 in 2010. She charged Rs. 150 for a dress and stitched two to three dresses per week for the villagers.

Rukhsana said that in the first year, she saved all her earnings and returned the CIF loan. Now stitching clothes has become a major source of income for her family. Apart from undertaking labour work, her husband also stitches clothes for men while she stitches dresses for girls and women. In 2011, she once again applied and received a CIF loan of Rs. 10,000. This time she bought a goat that produced a kid. She sold milk giving goat for Rs. 12,000 and returned the CIF loan. They looked after the kid which has now grown up and produced two kids.

Talking about her village in general, Rukhsana narrated, "After floods in 2010, other females who had earlier refused to join COs, also got organised forming 14 COs in total. In Village Organisation, the CO representatives shared the problems that the CO members faced. In response to the discussed problems they passed resolutions to the SRSO. Over time many

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benefits have been received including CIF, vocational training and small engineering interventions.”

Rukhsana continued with her story, “Many CO members built houses through SRSO’s Low Cost Housing Scheme. Thirty women, who did not know anything other than farming, received heifers to improve their livelihood. Each female was provided with two heifers; one to look after for a year and the other one she had to keep for her livelihood. Besides this, SRSO has provided training to women on embroidery and handicrafts through Benazir Bhutto Shaheed Youth Development Programme. Now, women make handicrafts and embroidered scarves, shirts, handkerchiefs, pillow cases, table clothes and bedsheets. They make these items in groups and sell them out in Sukkur and in exhibitions in Karachi.”

Being the representative of her Village Organisation and working closely with the villagers, Rukhsana has observed several tangible changes in household income and attitude of the villagers. She explained, “Previously the villagers had a misconception regarding vaccinations and polio drops that these interventions lower fertility in the new generation. We mistook vaccinations for committing sin and refusing Allah’s blessing by reducing birth rates. Later, SRSO spread awareness about immunisation through vaccination. Now, villagers register their newly born babies to complete their vaccination and polio courses. Also, SRSO linked us to Plan Pakistan that further developed awareness about health and hygiene in communities. With the enhancement of household income, villagers have built latrines and keep their household environment clean.”

Rukhsana narrated, “Education was one of the biggest problems that the Bordo caste’s children faced in the village. The VO members, when visited the school and inquired the teacher regarding the issue, found that the school was built on Sarki’s land and the landlord did not allow Bordo’s children to attend the school. On request, the teacher of the school showed his willingness to teach the children under the condition of the landlord’s permission. We [VO representatives] visited the Sarki’s landlord and requested him. After a long discussion, we convinced the landlord. Now, children from both castes attend the school without any discrimination.”

In 2013, the representatives of VOs in the Union Council federated and formed a Local Support Organisation Itehad (unity) to extend their collective action at the Union Council level. Rukhsana is now member of General Body of the LSO. Being educated among the LSO members, she keeps record of the meetings. The LSO members have now opened an office to conduct meeting and purchased a computer to for recordkeeping. Rukhsana said proudly, “Gaining confidence from the results of collective action, we [LSO members] visited the Education Department and appealed them to renovate and operate the schools, which were shut down and used as hay stores. Our efforts led to re-opening of four schools that are now functional for our girls and boys.”

At the household level, Rukhsana has improved her family’s livelihood through accessing and utilisation of CIF loans. In 2015, she applied and received another CIF loan of Rs. 15,000. She opened a small shop and now she has extended it to a grocery shop. She said that she has

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already returned the CIF loan. Apart from stitching clothes, her husband manages the shop. Rukhsana said, "Due to lack of nutritious food, my children grew thin and they used to get ill frequently. With the increase in income, besides vegetables and boiled rice, we also consume fish meat, chicken and wheat roti in our meals. Now, they are healthy and all five are getting education in the school."

Rukhsana concludes her story with a bright smile, "Throughout these years, I have seen the magical changes in my community. We had been living vulnerable life without awareness about health, education, social norms and sources of income. The turning point was getting united in our own organisations. These organisations allowed us to channel our voices for our rights. Our social pillar (CO/VO/LSO) became our strength to take actions to improve our lives. CIF allowed us to break the shackles of poverty. I cannot express the change that I have seen throughout these years in words. I am thankful to the Government of Sindh and SRSO for guiding us and supporting us. We look forward to more success in the future."

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