



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 14 of 15: Ms. Soni Bhatti

By Savaila Hunzai

Ms. Soni Bhatti, 42, is a resident of village Bodlo Bhatti of District Jacobabad. She was born into a poor sharecropper's family. The family lived in a straw hut in the resource-scarce settlement which lacked school, health facilities, electricity, conveyance and other infrastructure. Only drinking water was available. Recollecting her childhood memories, Soni said that after a certain age, stepping out from their house was considered bad for girls. She said that by the age of six-seven, she could play in mud with her siblings, but when she grew up a little more, she was locked in the premises of the house and she started to help her mother in household chores. Being the eldest among her five sisters, she was put under a strain of traditional norms of early marriage.



Soni was only 13 when her parents decided her marriage to one of her cousins in the same village. Her husband's household's economic situations were no different from her paternal home. She lived with a joint family including her parents-in-law, three brothers-in-law, two

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elder sisters-in-law and her husband in a straw hut. The straw hut was also too small for the family. In the rainy season, her family faced additional problems of leaking roof and accumulation of mud in the yard.

The family did not own any land, they had a buffalo which produced milk that they used for household consumption. Her husband worked as a labourer at rice mill during the season while the other family members worked as tenant farmers. They grew rice and wheat that hardly met their requirements. Soni remembers that the family ran out of basic food supplies within months of the harvest. She said that every year, before harvest time, they used to have a burden of loans that the family had borrowed from Deewan (money lending) community during food shortages in the lean season.

Soni's first child was a boy. She recalls that her first child was healthy, but the other eight were not as healthy from the time of their birth. Soni explained that she used to work in fields till the ninth month of her pregnancy. With one and a half year of birth spacing between each child, she gave birth to her children at home without any support from a midwife. Talking about birth spacing she said, "Until recently, we did not know about family planning. No one in the village knew about it."

In sickness they had to take 10 km in a donkey cart to reach the hospital in Thul. She said that the family's diet included simple Lassi (butter milk) and dried Roti [bread]. In lean seasons the elders in family especially women did not eat. She preferred her children to eat and survive while she slept with empty stomach.

Soni recalls, "One year before the heavy rains a survey team visited our village. They took some information about each household. After a couple of weeks, the team revisited us and asked the females to get together for a meeting. Our men prohibited us from meeting the outsiders. We stayed in, while our men met the team and learned that SRSO field staff wanted to meet with and work with the local women. After much discussions and removal of misconceptions about SRSO, we were allowed to meet with the SRSO team at their fifth visit. Our first meeting was held and it was strange and difficult for us to interact with the outsiders. We did not even have courage to utter a word in front of our men, rather talking to outsiders. We trembled when they asked our names. They asked us to make Tanzeem, we did not understand what it was. However, we felt happy knowing that they will help us improve our livelihoods. With the repeated visits by SRSO's Social Organiser we got accustomed to holding meetings. We formed a CO comprising 20 members. We selected our president and manager. They then attended training sessions organised by SRSO where they learned about how to conduct meetings, record keeping and savings."

Soni further narrated, "After attending the training, the CO president and manager conducted our meetings, where we discussed our problems. Each of us were asked for our opinion. It was the first time in our lives that we were asked about our views and opinions. Now as we had become a group, we started to resolve some of our mutual arguments regarding defecation places and sanitation. Also, SRSO team held awareness sessions regarding health and hygiene."

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The 2010 rains and floods destroyed their shelters and the agricultural lands were flooded. This made Soni's family more vulnerable. She remembered, "We left our shelters to take refuge on some higher lands until we cleaned and dried our houses. The flood water did not reach our shelters, but it filled the land where we used to grow crops. We had nothing to eat for many days, luckily the flood water had brought fishes to our agricultural land. The year was the worst year of our lives with no food, labour, shelter or any other thing in hand. We survived eating fish until our men found some labouring work during reconstruction."

After the flood was over, the men in Soni's family worked as labourers in construction of public infrastructure and earned some money. Also, due to lack of hay, their livestock grew thinner. They sold their livestock and decided to build three shelters and to split the joint family. Soni's husband built a single room mud and straw house. She started to cook separately for her children. As now her husband was the only breadwinner, she faced difficulties in making the both ends meet when her husband did not find labour. She was in a continuous stress worrying about her children's needs.

Soni, along with her CO members passed a resolution to SRSO to support them to earn livelihood. After three months to this resolution, SRSO team conducted a survey and asked the CO members to make Micro Investment Plans (MIP) for their households. Soni said that the VO manager asked her about what she wanted to do with the CIF loan, if given. She mentioned that she had learned stitching clothes and making handicrafts, but she did not have capital to utilise her skills.

In December 2011, she received a CIF loan of Rs. 10,000. With this money, she bought a sewing machines as she had mentioned in her MIP. She started to stitch dresses for her villagers. She said, "I charged Rs. 50-100 per dress. Some of the villagers paid in terms of wheat flour that I utilised for household consumption. I saved little by little and returned CIF loan after six months. Afterwards, I earned and saved money for my daughter's marriage."

Soni said, "By 2012, agricultural land was suitable to cropping and we started to work on land too. Now hay was available, but I did not have any livestock. Also, my children grew very thin due to lack of quality food at home. Therefore, I applied and received another CIF loan of Rs. 10,000. I bought two goats with that money. The goats produced twins. Three of the offspring died of some diseases and one survived. I looked after the mothers and the remaining offspring. This improved my family's diet and my children were happy having livestock around." She said that she returned the CIF loan in one year from the saving she earned by stitching.

Polishing her existing skills, Soni attended a training session provided by Crafts Enterprise Department (CED) of SRSO in 2014. She learned making colour combinations and designs of Rillis (traditional wall/floor covering) and other handicrafts. To utilise these skills, she applied for another loan from the CIF and received Rs. 10,000 in the same year. She bought inputs such as fabric, threads, mirror pieces and other requisites. She made Rillis, handmade fans, decoration pieces, hair tassels for brides, and woven baskets by straw pieces. She said that

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the group of 20 women, who made items individually, were then linked to market by SRSO's CED. Collectively, they set up stalls in festivals where they sold their handmade items. Soni said that from her first stall she earned a profit of Rs. 8,000.

Soni stated proudly, "Now, we have formed a Business Development Group. We make handicrafts in groups and sell them out in Karachi as well. Recently, we sold our products in Sartyoon Sang Crafts Exhibition in Karachi." She stated that her husband acknowledges her continuous struggle and participation in income generating activities. Soni would not be able to arrange marriages honourably for her four daughters if she had not attended these exhibitions, she said.

In 2016, to further diversify her income sources Soni opened a small shop. She used Rs. 10,000 from a CIF loan and adding more amount from her savings, she purchased some food items and daily household necessities to sell at the shop. Now, her eldest son, who was earlier unemployed, keeps the shop while she continues her artisan work. She explained that from this shop, she receives a profit of Rs. 300-400 per day. She saves some amount from the profit regularly and plans to extend the small shop into a grocery store very soon.

Soni concludes her story, "After becoming CO member and taking four cycles of CIF loans, I finally can live my life with dignity. There was a time when I used to beg to the landlords for food for my children, but now I help the needy fellows in the village. Recently, we [CO members] financed one of our fellow CO member for her surgery in a hospital in Jacobabad. I could not educate my elder son and four daughters due to prior financial constraints; however, the young two go to school now. My experience and the experience of my fellow CO members clearly demonstrates that rural women can make significant contributions to household economy if given necessary support, just as SRSO gave to us."

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