



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 2 of 15: Ms. Musarat Abro

By Savaila Hunzai

Ms. Musarat Abro was born in Ahmed Mian Soomro village of Jacobabad district in 1983. She was the fifth among her siblings: six brothers and four sisters. Soon after her birth, her father found a labouring work in Jacobabad town and her family shifted there. There they lived in a single mudroom. The family did not own any land or livestock. They relied on her father's income. Musarat remembers that during her childhood she accompanied her mother for collecting water from a hand



pump that was located far away from their house. Unlike her village girls, she had access to a primary school in the city from where she passed her examination of grade five. She passed her grade eight as a private candidate and also learned stitching clothes from a neighbour.

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Musarat was married to her cousin at the age of 14. She recalled that her brothers did not like her husband and for that reason they had a pre wedding argument and bitterness among families. However, the elders in the family forced her to get married to her cousin. She said, "Since the base of this marriage was mingled with bitter arguments among families, later the females in my in-laws started taking revenge from me. My husband's family had an intention that they would give me divorce right after the marriage. This was intended to show their power. Literally some minutes after Nikah, my mother-in-law told me that I was in her house only for a day or two and then they would leave me. These threats put me under stress. Everyone in the family was angry at me for rejecting the proposal in the beginning. My sisters-in-law also started to give me warnings and would treat me badly. I would get frightened and fearful whenever someone from the family spoke to me. However, my husband had assured me secretly that things will be fine."

Musarat said that the women in the family collected water from a tube-well and menfolk used to sell that water in villages facing water scarcity. She took her responsibilities of doing household work in mornings and collected water for the men to supply on their donkeys. They also worked in the landlord's fields to get some wheat and rice in return.

After two years of her marriage, Musarat gave birth to her first child, a daughter. This did not go down well with her in-laws and they began to accuse Musarat of being mentally disturbed. Musarat said, "My husband was very supportive and he did not pay heed to their suggestions of leaving me. In-laws were extremely abusive, manipulative and played tricks to tease me. Whenever I asked for some food during my sickness, they would become physically violent, throwing things at me, shoving me and trying to force me out of the house. They blamed me of theft and tortured me mentally. My health condition worsened with the passage of time. I found no one to share my pain and grief with. I became helpless. I was unable to sleep at nights. I began to lose my hair. Assuming that I was mentally ill, my in-laws gave me antipsychotic injection. I was not mad, but I was made a psychological patient by daily torture. I wanted to go to my parents' home, but my husband did not allow me to visit my parents without his escort. Neither had he found time for me to accompany me to go and see my parents. Also, at the time of my marriage, I was told by my mother to try to be more submissive no matter how bad they behave. Therefore, I continued to stay and prayed to Allah to change my life for the better or to call me up."

Musarat continued with her story, "When my third child was stillborn, SRSO team visited our village. Initially, they only met our men and talked to them about the programme. The landlords and rich in the village refused to allow their females to interact with outsiders. However, my brothers-in-law and husband had trust in me and they knew I was educated among the females in locality, they allowed me to interact with the SRSO female staff. After talking to them I observed that Social Organisers were humble and only wanted to support us. I was quite happy thinking about the fact that may be Allah has sent a source to guide us."

About a month after the SRSO team's visit, 2010 flood waters entered into nearby villages. Many villagers lost their houses, livestock and lands to flood. However, Musarat's house was not affected by the flood in 2010, as it was located on an elevated platform. Talking about

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restrictions on women's mobility in village, she narrated, "When SRSO staff were in search of a local female to conduct a survey in flood affected areas, I took the responsibility of registering our villagers for flood relief. Observing me conducting surveys in emergency shelters, the local men made derogatory comments. They tried to manipulate my brothers-in-law and husband to prohibit me from conducting survey. They said it was only men's work to go out and conduct surveys. One man had said, "She will make our females rebellious like her".

However, Musarat's family supported her and asked her to be careful while going out. Much to her horror, after the fourth day's survey when Musarat returned home she found that the local landlord's (wadera) men had tried to burn her house. Luckily my father-in-law and brothers-in-law arrived in time and extinguished fire before it burned down everything. Musarat said that after the floods, SRSO had provided emergency aid and later built shelters for the needy. "They had already won the trust of the poor in the locality and they were satisfied with SRSO's support. When SRSO staff revisited the village to mediate a meeting with females, the poor households in the village welcomed them whole-heartedly."

"In the meeting, Social Organisers asked us to unite ourselves in groups that we later called Community Organisations (COs). In my CO, we were 20 members. We named our CO Nasreen after the name of our president, whom we selected after a unanimous agreement among all members. With the passage of time we learnt to discuss issues we faced and together we tried to resolve our problems. One of the main issues we faced after flood was that our children caught skin allergies and malaria. The CO members collectively took the responsibility of cleaning the area. We filled pits to address issues of stagnant water. We also learnt the ways to keep our houses clean. I felt peace and contentment working with the females in village; however, at home I always felt desperate and hapless. My sisters-in-law and mother-in-law considered me a 'bad woman' and they said I interact with men in meetings and they come in vehicles to meet me," Musarat said.

Musarat added that with their frequent visits, the Social Organiser understood their situation. She had finally found someone in her life to share her painful story with. "She consoled me. During her visits she motivated me to become braver and ignore bad comments. If SRSO did not approach me, I would have further slipped into depression and would even have committed suicide," she stated. The greatest conflict took place between Musarat and elder females in the family when she showed her desire to attend Community Management Skills Training (CMST). She explained that since no one in the family attended meetings and worked outside before, so she was denied permission strictly by her mother-in-law. They stopped talking to her. On this occasion her husband's support was significant and he defended her decision and her in-laws had to agree because men have an ultimate authority over women's lives. Musarat added that often she was short of basic items like soap and females in the family did not take care of her basic needs in the absence of her husband.

Musarat said that her life started to change for better when in 2011, she applied for and received a Rs. 9,000 loan from CIF. She said that this fund was managed by the Village Organisation and she had to fill Micro Investment Plan to apply for CIF. In MIP, Musarat

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highlighted that she had tailoring skills, but she did not have a machine to utilise her skills. With the money from CIF, she bought a sewing machine and began stitching clothes for the villagers. She charged Rs. 100 to stitch a suit and saved money to repay CIF loan within a year. In 2013, Musarat again applied for and received Rs. 9,000 loan from CIF. She bought two sheep with this money. Musarat said that keeping livestock is another way of saving money. She kept the sheep with a shepherd as the family did not have any land to grow feed for them. Musarat returned the loan from her saving that she made through stitching clothes and making Rillis (traditional floor/wall coverings) for villagers.

SRSO provided Musarat another opportunity to further polish her tailoring and embroidery skills under Benazir Bhutto Shaheed Youth Development Programme (BBSYDP), where she was a master trainer and trained further 40 females in her VO. She said that the new responsibilities increased her burden because she had to perform household chores after returning from the training sessions. The females in her family kept making sarcastic comments, but she preferred not to confront them. She performed her tasks devotedly and avoided arguments that would lead to unpleasant situations and fights. Musarat conducted the training sessions for four months in her village and received Rs. 15,000 as her monthly salary. She said that she pooled the salary from the four months and handed it over to her husband to purchase a rickshaw for him, who earlier collected and supplied water on donkey carts to villages.

The 40 trained women artisans then made a Business Development Group (BDG). SRSO linked these females with their Craft Enterprise Department (CED) that further gave them orders to make hand-made items. As they were now skilled, they made hand-made jewellery, mobile pouches, Sindhi hats, Rillis, cushions and many more items to sell out to CED. Musarat said that now she along with her CO/VO members display their items in exhibitions in Karachi. She said that she applied for another loan from CIF and received Rs. 9,000 in 2016. She used this money to buy inputs for the hand-made items. Apart from the gains from BDG, being the only literate female in her locality, she was offered a job of Community Health Worker (CHW) under a USAID's Health Communication Programme.

Musarat receives a monthly stipend of Rs. 3,000. Musarat registered all the pregnant women in her catchment area and regularly undertakes household visits to advise women about the importance of pre-natal check-ups, nutrition, and immunisation of pregnant women and young children. Musarat stated, "Before we did not have awareness about maternal health. There had been cases when women carried dead babies in their womb, unknowingly and went through fatal circumstances. Our men did not even ask if we faced issues related to pregnancies and deliveries. It was considered as a taboo topic to talk about or disclose problems relating to maternal health. Our elder females would say, "You do not have potential to carry your baby in your womb or you do not like your husband so you are making excuses." Also, our children suffered from Tetanus Toxoid right after birth or even it attacked them in their teens. As now we have vaccinations for pregnant mothers and babies, we look forward for our new generation free of Tetanus Toxoid."

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Musarat further explained the complexities of her job, “In the beginning I faced hardships in convincing women to do family planning. Village women used to get upset. They usually commented, “As if you are providing us food and clothes, you want us to take medicines to increase gaps between our child births and it is sin to refuse Allah’s blessings (babies). CO was the best platform where females shared their sufferings and pain and it was comparatively easy for me to convince villagers about the importance of polio drops, immunisation, health and hygiene and sanitation than personalised sessions. Also, I go door-to-door and inquire about health conditions and suggest them to see doctors. Now, females and even their men respect me for providing them right information. In community my attitude and behaviour towards people and my ability to support them is admired. Also, in appreciation of my activities and its influences in the union council, Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund, SRSO, and SANA awarded me certificates and shields of appreciation.”

In her leisure time, Musarat continues stitching clothes for villagers. She hands over the earnings to her mother-in-law and saves some in her CO account. She felt a change in her in-laws’ attitude towards her. Her mother-in-law started to take care of her children. Even her sisters-in-law let her son to sleep in their lap. This means although her mobility, involvement in CO, and frequent meetings with outsiders were some of the major causes of criticism, it was also a source of assimilation into the household.

More money in her house reduced disputes to some extent. Her husband was now able to make more money and provide basic necessities to the family. Her in-laws were now able to save some money and they upgraded their house. She has gotten more control over her earnings now. Instead of handing over full amount to her in-laws, she deposits her children’s school fee and saves some money in her CO account. Her in-laws have no objection about her earnings and savings as they have realised her responsibilities towards her children have increased now. Musarat said, “My desire for getting involved in Community Organisations and Local Support Organisation was not only limited to material gains, what I held close to my heart was the notion of being treated in respectable way. For me, life is not only limited to material luxuries, but also mental peace, respect and dignity at household level as well as at community level is crucial.”

While Musarat had desired of a better treatment at her home, through interaction with villagers in CO/VO/LSO, she learned to act in public places with dignity, grace and confidence. Initially her life was confined to the boundaries of her house, now she is able to travel to Sukkur, Karachi, Islamabad, Kashmir and other cities to inspire other females to get mobilised and foster their own organisations for social and economic empowerment.

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