



Government of Sindh's Union Council Based Poverty Reduction Programme
Social and Economic Empowerment of Women
Household Case Studies from Tharparkar District



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). The Chief Minister of Sindh considerably agreed to support the Thardeep Rural Development Programme (TRDP) to implement UCBPRP in Tharparkar district. Under UCBPRP, TRDP 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 10 of 15: Ms. Sahiban

By Savaila Hunzai

Ms. Sahiban is a 50-year-old woman, hails from Lobhar village of Tharparkar district of Sindh. She was born and brought up in Khari Wah village. She said that the Khari Wah lacked drinkable water; all available water was bitter and they could not use it. Her parents had six children, all girls. Sahiban was the eldest of the six daughters. The family was extremely poor, and did not possess any land or livestock. Being the eldest, Sahiban had the responsibility for undertaking the household chores and also working as a farm labourer. Her father was old and sick, hence could not work as a farm labourer. He, however, supervised his wife and daughters with working in the farms for local land owners. Payment for farm labour was in-kind and that too at the time of harvest. Given the variability of rain-fed agriculture, the family's labour payments were also variable.



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In times of drought, the family received no payments. This would further enhance the family's vulnerability and food insecurity. Sahiban remembers that during the four-month rainy season, on the directions of the landlord the family would cultivate millet. In return, the landlord would share a small portion of the total production. Whatever share the family received was not sufficient to meet their basic food needs. Sahiban said, "In years of no or less rainfall, the millet plants dried out and died before we could harvest anything." She said that even in normal rains, the available food was usually consumed within few months of harvest. Therefore, every year for seven to eight months, the family had to undertake the difficulty of migrating to the irrigated areas of neighbouring districts to seek labouring work in order to just survive.

Sahiban spoke about the family's vulnerability during annual migration cycle. She said sadly, "We did not have any animal to carry our minimal belongings, so we had to carry them on our heads as we walked out of our homes. Every day we would walk miles and miles. During hot sunny days, it was very difficult to walk but we carried on and on. We had no shoes, only slippers made of used tyres and tubes. If these were torn then we would share slippers, which meant that some of the sisters had to walk barefooted. As my father was sick, we had to stop every other hour, so he could rest and drink some water and then continued walking. Walking under the sun was unsuitable for him, but he would say that we have to move on. During our long journey, we would eat only dried millet *roti* (flat bread). Due to all this, my father's health condition would worsen. We spent nights by the roadside, under the stars. Barking of wild dogs would keep us awake. I would see buses go by and imagine the life of passengers traveling in such comfort.

Upon arrival to the irrigated areas, our father would manage to find a local landlord that we would work for. After an agreement with the landlord, in a corner of a field, we would settle down. We, the six sisters, actively collected straws to make a simple wall-less shack that was our shelter for seven months. We also collected bits of plastic and twigs to rebuild the shelter in case it fell down during the rains. We did not even own a *rilli* (traditional wall/floor covering), we slept on the ground and practiced open defecation. We felt insecure at times. From dawn to dusk, us four sisters, along our mother toiled in fields. Our landlord grew cotton, rice, wheat, chillies and sugarcane. We worked very hard during the harvest periods. Sometimes the landlord would give us some *atta* (wheat flour) and *lassi* (butter milk). We would ground chillies and eat them with *roti*. For all our labouring in the fields, the landlord would compensate us by sharing a small portion of the production. My father would then sell this produce and save the cash for the journey back to Tharparkar, and to our village. Landlord's wife was kind, and she would give us used cloth sheets and our mother used to make dresses for us by hand stitching."

Sahiban said that like the women and girls in her community, she was not aware about the education and schooling. She said, "We only knew that every year we had to stay in the village for four months and then we had to move to irrigated areas for remaining months of the year. We had never seen any school. I did not even know if anyone from the village attended any school. All relatives were just like us, extremely poor and focused just on basic survival."

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Sahiban does not remember her age when she was married. She said that her maternal family searched out a groom, who was 12-13 years older than her, in the same village. Her husband's family included parents-in-law and two brothers-in-law. They lived in two mud huts. The family was extremely poor and had no productive assets. Soon after her marriage, Sahiban was given the responsibility for undertaking all household chores. She said that her in-laws' routine life was same as of her parents. The landless and asset less family would work on daily wages to earn a basic livelihood.

Sahiban used to wake up early in the morning. Her first task was to ground millet for making *roti*. The process took her 2-3 hours. Then she would go out and scavenge twigs, branches and dried leaves to cook millet *roti* for breakfast. After feeding her family, Sahiban would leave to fetch water along with her neighbours. She said, "Fetching water was the biggest challenge that we the women faced. On daily basis, we used to walk for 2-3 hours to another village to collect two cans of water for household's consumption. Also, in the years of less rainfall, the well dried up and we had to search for water in other villages. We have experienced droughts, when we would spend the whole day trying to collect two cans of water from far-off areas. By the time we returned homes, our children would be crying out of thirst and hunger. Many a night I have slept on an empty stomach." Apart from undertaking household chores and fetching water, Sahiban also worked as a farm labourer.

Sahiban said that for four months of the year, she along with her husband and father-in-law, did the labouring work on land owners' fields in the village and then migrated to the irrigated areas for the rest of the year. Every year they built a thatch roof. It was built on four stilts, to support the straw roof. She remembers that during rains, they did not have any option to protect themselves from rainwater, mud, and crawling insects. She said that she has given birth to some of her children in these wall-less shelters. She gave birth to her first child, a baby boy, after one year of her marriage. The other 15 children followed up with the gap of one year between every child. She said that out of 16, four children passed away, and she now has 12 children (eight sons and four daughters).

Speaking about the deceased children, she said that the second child, a daughter, died right after a complicated delivery at her home. Her husband could not afford her health check-ups and she had to suffer from challenges during and after deliveries. Also, there was a superstitious aspect too. She explained, "After my daughter's death, I suffered from pain for four months. I think I was bewitched by a spirit. I felt better after a visit to a *bhopa* (spiritual healer)." Her two daughters died during delivery. Sahiban said, "It was the expected month of delivery, early in a morning, and as on any usual day, I joined my husband in sugarcane fields and supported him in cutting and collection of sugarcane harvest. I started to feel an abdominal pain at noon, but I ignored this because I had to do the labouring work. With the passage of time the pain worsened. However, after completing work, I returned to the shelter late in the evening. I went through severe pain for hours and delivered a stillborn daughter. I had felt the baby's movement early in the morning, I think, she passed away during delivery. The other one was stillborn due to heavy work load in harvest season."

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Sahiban continued, "I did not have the option to take rest. I had to work till late evenings to feed my children. I used to keep my children with their grandmother, who was old and could not even walk, and I toiled in the labouring fields. One evening, when I returned from the field, my four-year-old son was missing. We searched our surroundings, but he could not find him. When I asked other children about where they saw him for the last time, one of my daughters said that he was playing inside a sand dune. When we searched out, we found that the sand dune had collapsed on him and he was already dead."

Sahiban said that no one in the village was aware of family planning, maternal health and child care. Women in the village carried heavy loads of water on their heads and worked in fields during pregnancies. In emergencies, they had to wait for a male family member to escort them to visit a medical facility. She said that there was no health facility in the village or nearby, and also there was no link road. In serious sicknesses, patients were carried on shoulders and taken to another village which had a dispensary. Being subsistence oriented farm labourers, the family lacked money, and this also constrained them from visiting health facilities. A simple visit to a health facility often led to denting the family's economy and increasing the debt burden.

Sahiban also spoke about family's diet. Their diet was very simple. In the four-month rainy season in the village, they often ate wild mushrooms, herbs or dried millet *roti*. In other months, they were food insecure, and often went hungry. When the family ran out of food, they begged *lassi* from their livestock owning neighbours. Sahiban remembers the times when she had to feed her children and the elders but herself stayed hungry.

Sahiban recalled, "I, my family and our previous generations went through these shackles of poverty and hunger. Since childhood, we had been struggling to survive. So of course our expectations for our children were the same that they too would grow up like us and live like us, and have a life full of poverty, hunger, and basically *na-umeedi* (hopelessness). When the children reached a certain height, they would join us as farm labourers. One day a team from the Thardeep Rural Development Programme (TRDP) visited us and our hopes, plans and lives began to change for better."

Sahiban said with a laughter, "We hid ourselves in huts and bushes when we saw a vehicle for the first time in our hamlet. We were scared. Even our men hesitated to meet the visiting team. A female Social Organiser accompanied by two other men asked us to come out. She asked us about the reason for our hiding. We replied that we thought the men in the vehicle would kidnap our children, or that they might harm us. We had never trusted outsiders. Yasimine, the Social Organiser, then sat with us and assured us that she was here to support us. They informed the villagers about the Government of Sindh's Union Council Based Poverty Reduction Programme (UCBPRP) that TRDP was implementing. She remembers that the SO said that the programme was for women only. "Our men observed the discussion and allowed us to participate in TRDP's programme. The visiting team from TRDP then asked us to inform all neighbours to get together at one meeting place for the next time. Following the first meeting, the field staff kept visiting the village more frequently. With frequent discussions, we learned that the women had to get organised in Community Organisations (CO) to get

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support to improve our lives and livelihoods. Once we were organised, this encouraged us to move forward. Gradually, women began to find voice. They began to introduce themselves.”

In 2010, Sahiban became a member of a CO that consisted of 12 females. The newly formed CO was named as Bhel Paro after the name of their settlement. The CO members selected their president and a manager. “Khanu was active and trustworthy, so we suggested her name for the position of president. At the initial CO meetings, we used to speak all at once, therefore these meetings were quite chaotic.” She said that initially meetings were mediated by Yasmine, TRDP’s Social Organiser. Later, as the president and the manager gained experience and confidence they began to conduct CO meetings on their own. Sahiban said that at these CO meetings she learnt about health, hygiene, sanitation and importance of savings. She said, “We did not know about dates and months. We only knew the names of days. We learned dates and names of months to remember the scheduled meetings. We also learnt how to behave in the meetings, the meeting rules, and began to speak in turns.”

Sahiban said, “Previously, villagers didn’t stay in hamlet for long. Every year, we used to migrate to Badin or other irrigated areas in search of farm labour work. At the time when TRDP launched UCBPRP, only 12 families were present in the village, and we also had plans for seasonal migration to irrigated areas. Now, we have two COs and all are settled permanently in the village. We no longer have to go through the annual painful migration cycle.”

Sahiban remembered that prior to the CO formation, TRDP had conducted the Poverty Scorecard (PSC) census survey. Results from this poverty survey were shared with all households. Her household poverty score was 5 out of 100. She said, “In the meetings, we learned about Community Investment Fund (CIF) to be utilised for income generating activities. None of the CO members had courage to take the CIF loan because we had never seen money before; we the poor women knew nothing about handling or managing money. Money matters were dealt by our men. When I heard about the CIF, I hesitated. I refused to take the loan. In first year after CO formation, I only observed some other members who had taken CIF loans and raised livestock or invested the loans in their micro enterprises. In 2011, after learning more and gaining some confidence from the positive experience of fellow CO members who had taken CIF loans, I also applied for a CIF loan. The president asked me to prepare a Micro Investment Plan (MIP) for my household. In the MIP, I mentioned my potential for raising goats. Then, I applied for a small loan of Rs. 5,000 (USD 50). My husband bought two (2) goats with the money. My elder two sons, who did not attend any school due to poverty, shepherded for a local livestock owner on a meagre wage. They looked after the goats.”

Sahiban continued and mentioned that a shock occurred to make her family suffer, “Adding to our vulnerability, one night our hut fell down on us due to a heavy rain. Luckily, it did not fall down on my children’s heads. While they were asleep, the rain water entered the hut and it eroded the mud wall. I grabbed the little ones in my arms and woke up the older ones to save our lives. Luckily no one was hurt in the incident. We spent the night on a sand dune and waited for daybreak. Our neighbours’ huts also leaked and stood in rain till morning. Next

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day, my husband arranged a tent from a local land owner. Jointly with our neighbours, we lived in the tent for a month. Meanwhile, we collected bushes, and straws and built a wall-less shelter (shack) to live. Life started to become more vulnerable living in an open shelter. We could not afford a *rilli* (traditional wall/floor covering) for our children to sleep on. At times we felt insecure leaving our children behind while we left for farm fields for work. Therefore, we used to keep the infants under a bush-shade or carried on our shoulders while weeding out in fields. Although life was very busy in rainy season, we [CO members] still managed to gather and hold our meetings. We used to discuss our problems. When TRDP's field staff visited us, we shared our problem of lack of housing with them. After a survey by their field staff and engineers, TRDP provided us concrete shelters through its Low Cost Housing Scheme. Now, we have two concrete huts and a latrine. My shelter is now safe and durable."

In 2013, Sahiban returned the outstanding CIF loan by selling two kids that her goats had produced. Now the family owned two goats as productive assets. They looked after the goats and consumed milk at home. This positive experience of managing her first CIF loan boosted her confidence. She became confident to apply for and manage another loan, a bigger loan. Sahiban applied for a CIF loan of Rs. 15,000 (USD 150). She bought three goats with this amount. She said that her herd size of goats kept increasing as they produced more kids. Later Sahiban exchanged 12 goats from her herd for a cow to get more milk. She said, "Unlike before, we have had rains and our livestock grew healthy. Accumulation of livestock improved my family's diet as well. Since then, we have stopped begging for *lassi* (butter milk) from the livestock owning neighbours."

Sahiban said, "Since our goat herd size had increased and represented a significant source of income for us, our family decided to stop the practice of seasonal painful migration to irrigated areas. The long journey with carrying loads and children on our heads used to be so tiresome. Walking for days with empty stomachs and facing thirst, we often fell asleep on road sides. Following the vulnerabilities in the temporary shelters were even felt so insecure and exposed. We defecated in open spaces. We had access to no services, we were just poor nomads wondering in search of farm labour jobs. Our diet was very basic and consisted of stale millet *roti* (flat bread). While we toiled under the sun in the farm fields, our children played in and ate mud. I came to know that my youngest son used to eat mud, when one day he put a handful of mud in his mouth and offered me some. We did not have a permanent and secure shelter to keep our children away from dirt. We were unaware about public schools and public health facilities. Now, through CIF loans we have a herd of goats as our economic assets and source of income, we have preferred to settle down permanently in our village. We hope to diversify our sources of income. Being organised has given us confidence; CO has given fresh hope to me, to my family and to my fellow villagers."

Sahiban further said, "With the improved assets and incomes, our conditions have begun to improve. Giving up a nomadic life has allowed us to access public services. For example, our younger three children attend government primary school. Leading a nomadic life, we were not aware of the importance of education. The elder three children missed out on education.

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We, without education, spent a dark life. We hope that now our younger children will have the light of *ilm* (knowledge/education) in their lives.”

In 2014, through CO Sahiban was provided with a solar panel for lighting. She explained, “In the village, every household relied on kerosene as primary source of lighting. We used kerosene lamps at night and the cost was Rs. 10-20 (USD 0.1-0.2) per day. On the days when we had no cash to buy kerosene, we stayed in darkness. The free of cost solar panels, lights along with a battery and a charger provided by TRDP did not only become a convenient source of light, but also saved the cash that we earlier spent on kerosene oil. Also, this solar light enabled us to become more productive as we could make better use of our evenings, e.g. prepare embroidered items and help children do their homework. CO gave us social light and solar gave us electric light.”

Sahiban further said, “Although we are aware of girl’s education, we could not educate our daughters because we do not have any school for girls in the village. Boys can walk to other villages to attend the formal school, but for girls it is difficult. The CO members have discussed the issue regarding our daughters’ education but we have not been successful in establishing a school for girls in village. In our meetings with TRDP, we have mentioned this several times. However, we do not have a single literate person in the hamlet to teach. Teachers from other villages avoid teaching in our village because our village is far away from the main road. However, I am happy to say that our daughters have acquired tailoring and embroidery skills through vocational trainings provided by TRDP. In 2014, I applied for a CIF loan and received Rs. 20,000 (USD 200). With Rs. 10,000 (USD 100) from this loan, I purchased two (2) goats and with the remaining money, I bought a sewing machine for my daughter. I repaid the CIF loan by selling goat kids. My two daughters, who attended TRDP’s vocational training sessions, now stitch clothes for the villagers. They charge Rs. 150 (USD 1.5) for elders’ dresses and Rs. 100 (USD 01) for children’s dresses.” She said that with the increase in sources of income she was able to save Rs. 20 (USD 0.2) in every meeting of CO. “Our CO account is in UBL, where we save our money. So far, my personal savings with CO amount to Rs. 9,000 (USD 90). I can have access to this amount at any time of need.”

In 2015, Sahiban applied for and received another CIF loan of Rs. 20,000 (USD 200). She said, “I bought four (4) goats. I was able to return the CIF loan within six months by selling goat kids. I also exchanged goats for heifers. My elder sons look after the cattle. We now own three cows, four camels, a donkey, and two goats. One result of improvement in condition of the family is that our diet has also improved. We used to survive on stale *roti* but now have access to variety of food items. We sell milk and buy vegetables from the market. The family’s diet now includes *roti*, rice, milk, lassi, vegetables and butter; sometimes we also eat mutton.”

Sahiban also spoke about the hardships that the community women faced regularly, “One of the hardest and challenging daily task for us village women was to fetch water from a far-off dug-well. Water was 200 feet below the surface. Every day, three family members were needed to lower the bucket and pull out a bucket full of water. Also, carrying the load of water on heads was even more exhausting. But now as the Sindh government has provided the Reverse Osmosis (RO) filtration plant, and we have easy access to water. Also, in rainy

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seasons, we harvest the rain water in underground concrete tanks. I have four underground tanks for my household. We are able to build these after we diversified our sources of income. We use this water for household use and for livestock as well.”

Given the previous nomadic and subsistence oriented pattern of life; the villagers were always on the move in search of farm labour work. This disintegrated life did not allow the people to develop a sense of community. For example, they could not celebrate any festival. Now that they are permanently settled, they enjoy their social and cultural life too. Sahiban said that the villagers are much happier now. She said with a smile on her face, “Now, every year we celebrate Teej and Holi and we celebrate the festivals in harmony. We make good food and eat together.”

Talking about her own household, Sahiban said, “Before, I did not have a single *rilli*. After getting united in our CO, our quality of life has improved. We have improved housing, including a latrine. We have access to electricity and water. We have good food to eat. One of my sons works in a garments factory. He is now able to buy good clothes and shoes to wear. The younger ones are studying in schools. My daughters are skilful; they also contribute to family’s income. We no longer lead a nomadic life; we are settled. We are together in CO. We are planning for better lives for us and for our children. This *inqilab* (revolution) in our lives is due to the government of Sindh and TRDP. I want to thank them for making our lives beautiful.”

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