



Strengthening Legal Empowerment in Rural Communities through Community-based Paralegals

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Narrative Interim Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The reporting period reflects the accomplishments of the legal empowerment project in South Punjab from June, 2017 to March, 2018. The project is being implemented with the local partner, National Rural Support Programme (NRSP) with technical and financial support of Foundation Open Society Institute.

The legal empowerment initiative aims to empower rural communities to resolve their legal issues through community based paralegals. Initially, a stakeholders mapping exercise was conducted in both project districts, i.e. Bahawalpur and Rajanpur, in the finalized union councils. As a result of a needs assessment survey, major areas were identified for legal awareness that predominantly cover various issues of women rights, child rights, civil documentation, consumer rights, ombudsman services and provision of free legal aid.

The project is being implemented in eight union councils of Rajanpur and Bahawalpur – four union councils per district. There are 40 paralegals – 16 male and 24 female – working in the project districts. The project is being implemented in areas where NRSP has already carried out social mobilization processes for the previous decade and has developed local structures of COs, VOs and LSOs.¹

Counselling cards, as a part of information, education and communication material, on civil documentation and women and child rights were designed and published for the first year of the project's implementation. In the reporting period, male and female paralegals conducted 1,439 awareness raising sessions and sensitized 26,737 CO and VO members – of which 9,925 were men whereas 16,812 were women – in eight union councils. Meantime, legal aid officers – lawyers by profession – conducted 206 legal aid clinics and shared 411 legal advices. The consistent sensitization processes of rural communities culminated in the identification of 997 cases, mainly of individual nature. Identified issues were mostly related to civil documentation, BISP and family laws, such as maintenance of the wife or child, cancellation of marriage, domestic violence, second marriage of husband, child marriage and corruption in the disbursement BISP funds. 415 of these 997 cases were resolved through advices, referral mechanisms, mediations and litigation. 15 women and men were provided free legal aid to obtain their legal rights regarding maintenance of child or wife, declaratory suits, cancellation of marriage and domestic violence.

Project staff went through a four-day orientation session and 3 two-day capacity-building trainings on the concepts of legal empowerment, paralegals, gender, fundamental rights, women rights, child rights, human rights, use of counselling cards and facilitation skills. The content of these trainings

¹ These COs consist of membership from 15 households on average. At the second tier, the COs federate at the village level into a Village Organisation (VO). At the third tier, VOs federate at the Union Council level to form a Local Support Organisation (LSO). This apex organisation consists of membership from VOs in the entire union council and is responsible for coordinating with its membership base to construct a development agenda for its members. It is also responsible for networking and developing linkages with external organisations such as local government, donors, NGOs and the private sector for the purpose of achieving its development agenda. There are currently 1,128 LSOs across Pakistan.

cascaded to paralegals at the district level where a total of 3 two-day trainings were conducted for the capacity-building of paralegals. Simultaneously, regular mentoring sessions by the head of paralegals were conducted in each union council on a weekly basis for paralegals to capacitate them to contribute to their rural communities more effectively.

A total of 6 bi-monthly meetings were conducted with stakeholders during the reporting period, which resulted in the formation of a District Legal Empowerment Forum (DLEF) in each district to extend additional support to the project for the activation of District Legal Empowerment Committees (DLECs) and speedy redress of grievances in rural communities.

Furthermore, 13 collaborative partnerships were developed in both districts with government departments, civil society forums and bar associations. This initiative played a major role in the identification and resolution of cases and approaching relevant stakeholders for the timely redress of grievances. As a result of a collaborative partnership, Punjab Commission for the Status of Women (PCSW) provided capacity-building training to project staff that subsequently cascaded to rural communities with 1,300 Nikah registrars trained on their roles and responsibilities – 700 Nikah registrars in 69 UCs of Rajanpur and 600 Nikah registrars in 24 UCs of Bahawalpur.

Strengthening of local support organizations (LSOs) and village organizations (VOs) on legal empowerment remains a major accomplishment during the reporting period. It also contributed to building the capacities of executive members of LSOs on concepts of legal empowerment and paralegals through regular mentoring sessions and weekly and monthly meetings. Ownership of the project at LSO level was reflected in their commitment, determination and selflessness in the execution of project activities in targeted areas.

PLANNED ACTIVITIES VERSUS PROGRESS

Duration of the legal empowerment project titled “Strengthening rural communities through community based paralegals” is two years – from June 2017 to May 2019 – managed by RSPN and implemented by NRSP. The project is being implemented in two districts of southern Punjab, i.e. Bahawalpur and Rajanpur. The major activities that the project boasts of are identification of paralegals, capacity building of staff and paralegals, awareness raising sessions on legal rights, case handling, formation of legal forums, provision of legal advices through legal aid clinics and free legal aid.

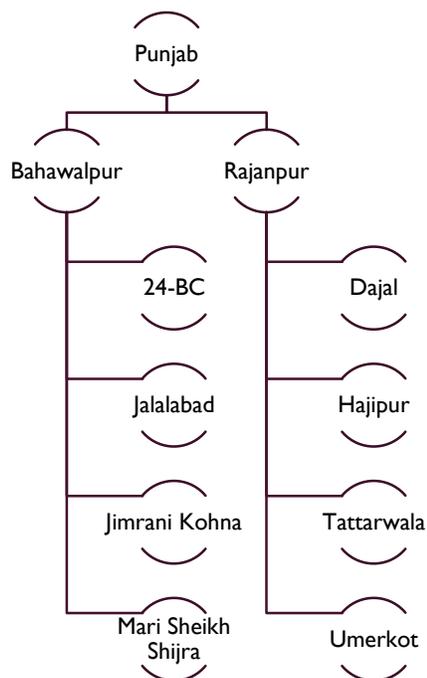
Following are brief descriptions of planned activities as compared to actual progress.

LSO Dialogue on Legal Empowerment



The legal empowerment team conducted a dialogue in each targeted union council of Rajanpur and Bahawalpur – resulting in a total of 8 dialogues – to mobilize local support organizations and familiarize LSOs/VOs and COs with the legal empowerment initiative and their roles and expected support in implementing and sustaining the project.

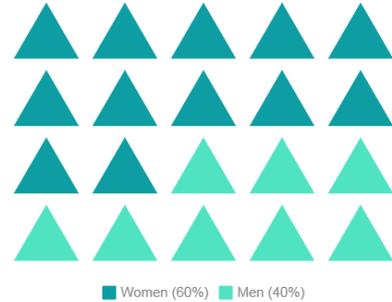
Furthermore, 10 meetings were organized with local support organizations’ (LSO) executive and general body members to introduce the project in the districts. 8 LSOs demonstrated interest in engaging the legal empowerment initiative in their respective districts. LSOs were selected on the basis of their activity in the area, willingness to take up the legal empowerment initiative, accessibility to local households, previous track record and availability of executive body members for meetings and capacity-building events. The following union councils were finalized for implementation of the legal empowerment project.



Identification of Paralegals

Local support organizations, in consultation with the legal empowerment project staff members, conducted 6 meetings in each union council at village level to select paralegals. The total numbers of paralegals working in each project district are given below.

Paralegals per District



Inception Meetings with Local Stakeholders

Meetings were conducted in both targeted districts, i.e. Bahawalpur and Rajanpur, for the inception of the legal empowerment project. Various stakeholders participated in these inception meetings, including representatives of Bait ul Maal, the Education Department, BISP, BAR Associates, pro-bono advocates and members of Aurat Foundation, Sadat Welfare, Ombudsman's office, Public Health and Engineering Department and LSOs. The 45 participants were given a presentation on the scope of the project.



Inception meetings were also an opportunity to gather stakeholders and discuss the legal issues of rural communities. The ombudsman and BISP representatives offered their services for the sensitization of rural communities through project awareness raising sessions. 4 participants in Rajanpur and 6 in Bahawalpur demonstrated interest in participating in legal empowerment forums.

Capacity-Building Trainings

Three capacity-building trainings for staff and paralegals were organised during the reporting period. These trainings focused on the concepts of legal empowerment, gender, role and limitations of paralegals, family laws and tools and techniques for awareness raising sessions, including facilitation skills. They also included techniques to deal with clients and handle sensitive cases, referrals and mediations. Gender sensitization was prioritized, as the key beneficiaries of the project are women deprived of their legal rights.

The initial orientation training workshop mentored 8 staff members, of which 6 were project staff and 2 from the district management team, while the subsequent two trainings mentored 6 staff members/heads of paralegals. Each training ended with the development of an action plan to cascade the training content to paralegals in each district. In collaboration with the Punjab Commission for the Status of Women (PCSW), an additional two-



day training on the role and responsibilities of Nikah registrars was provided to the project staff of both districts.

Trainings of Community-based Paralegals

Paralegals attended 3 capacity-building trainings in each district, i.e. Bahawalpur and Rajanpur, in the reporting period. Each training was two days long and accommodated 40 paralegals, of which 24 were women and 16 men. These capacity-building trainings developed the paralegals' understanding of the concepts of legal empowerment, role of paralegals, legal rights, mediation, gender and familiarity with various laws that are expected to be included in subsequent awareness raising sessions. Paralegals were equipped with tools and techniques for the conduct of client interviews, record keeping, intake form management, work plan preparation and facilitation skills for awareness raising sessions. Each training provided paralegals with opportunities to demonstrate learnt skills, information and knowledge for further improvisation. The session-delivery method was participatory, included group exercises, interactive sessions, presentations and individual exercises emphasizing practice based on the learning-by-doing approach.



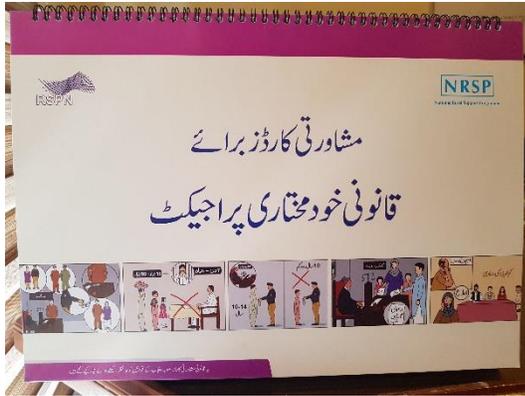
Staff Trainings for Nikah Registrars

Legal empowerment project staff members in both districts trained 925 Nikah registrars – 700 in Rajanpur and 225 in Bahawalpur – on their roles, responsibilities and relevant laws during a series of one-day trainings supported by the Punjab Commission for the Status of Women (PCSW). The first of the cascading trainings was attended by heads of paralegals/project staff members earlier in December, 2017. The legal empowerment project thus supported their extension to 24 UCs of Bahawalpur and 69 of Rajanpur.

The Nikah registrars' training is expected to play a major role in the reduction of child and forced marriages. This initiative also supported project staff in extending their network to include a larger body of Nikah registrars, chairpersons and UC secretaries who have assured of their support of rural community issues especially concerning family law, such as child, forced and second marriages.

Counselling Cards

Material to aid information, education and communication plays an enormous role in raising awareness among rural communities. The process included consultation with staff members, paralegals and LSO members to identify legal issues. Previous year's cases, LSO dialogue reports and relevant material of other organizations was also consulted. Subsequently, RSPN developed

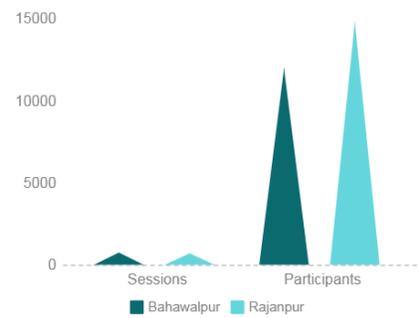


an interactive calendar of counselling cards comprising legal information, facilitative content for session delivery in Urdu, as well as a pictorial storyboard for each card. A legal expert was hired for the development of legal statements on civil documentation issues, family law, women protection law, child protection law, consumer law, Ombudsman services and free legal aid through DLECs. Finally, these cards were disseminated amongst paralegals to support their awareness raising sessions with male and female community members.

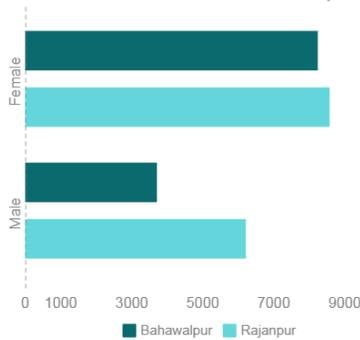
Awareness Sessions

Awareness raising has been an instrumental and effective tool in the sensitization of rural communities through counselling cards in the 8 targeted union councils – a total of 26,737 rural community members, consisting of 9,925 men and 16,812 women, were sensitized through 1,439 awareness sessions on various themes, including civil documentation, family law, women and child rights and administrative issues. Paralegals conducted these sessions in consultation with local support organizations and heads of paralegals/staff in their respective localities.

Awareness Sessions



Awareness Session Participants



These awareness raising sessions helped community members understand the extent of their rights, thereby boosting their self-respect, encouraging a culture of the promotion and protection of rights and generating discussion on legal rights at the household level. Women were given special consideration during these sessions as they belong to the largest deprived segment of Pakistani society. These awareness raising sessions, along with legal aid clinics, resulted in the identification of 791 cases, mainly on civil documentation, BISP and family issues, through community paralegals in targeted union councils.

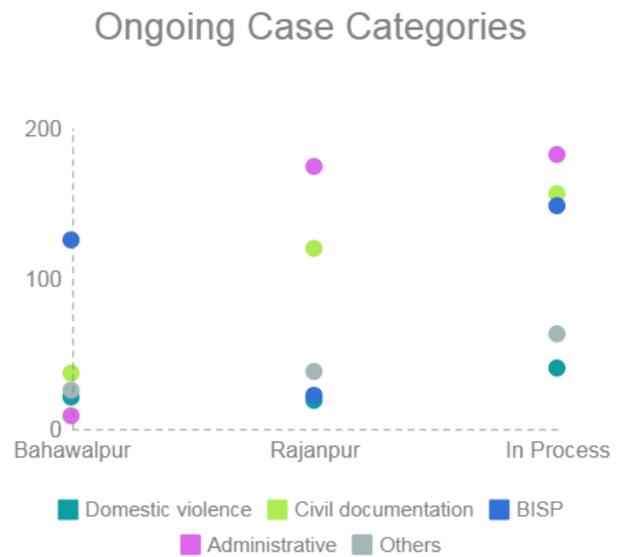
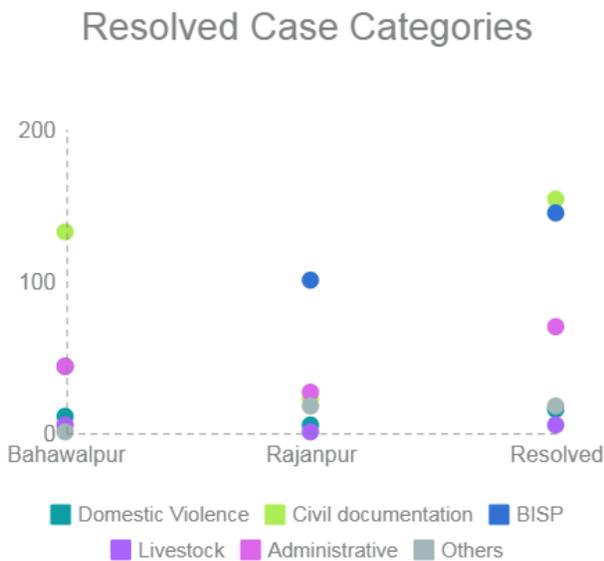
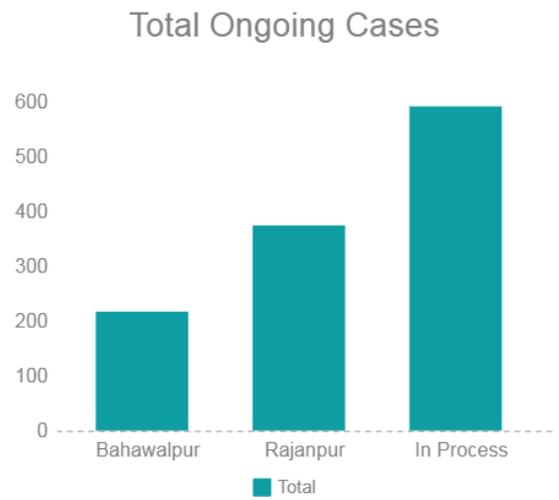
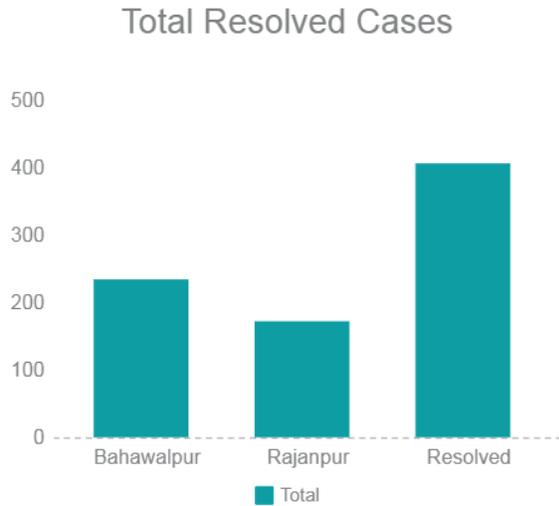
Cases and Advice

Legal awareness sessions conducted by paralegals subsequently culminated into the identification of legal issues in the project's targeted localities. A three-tier pattern is followed in the identification of cases.

Paralegals are instrumental in the identification and resolution of cases. By the reporting period, 997 cases, issues and grievances were identified through the three-tier identification process. These cases are broadly reflective of the effectiveness of awareness sessions and legal aid clinics as most are concerned with administrative, family, domestic, civil documentation, financial aid and communal issues, such as construction of a bridge, replacement of a transformer and availability of medicine in a government hospital. 415 of the 997 cases have been resolved, while the rest are in process and being regularly followed up. Most of the resolved cases relate to civil documentation (132), domestic violence (10), BISP (44), livestock (5) and administrative (43).



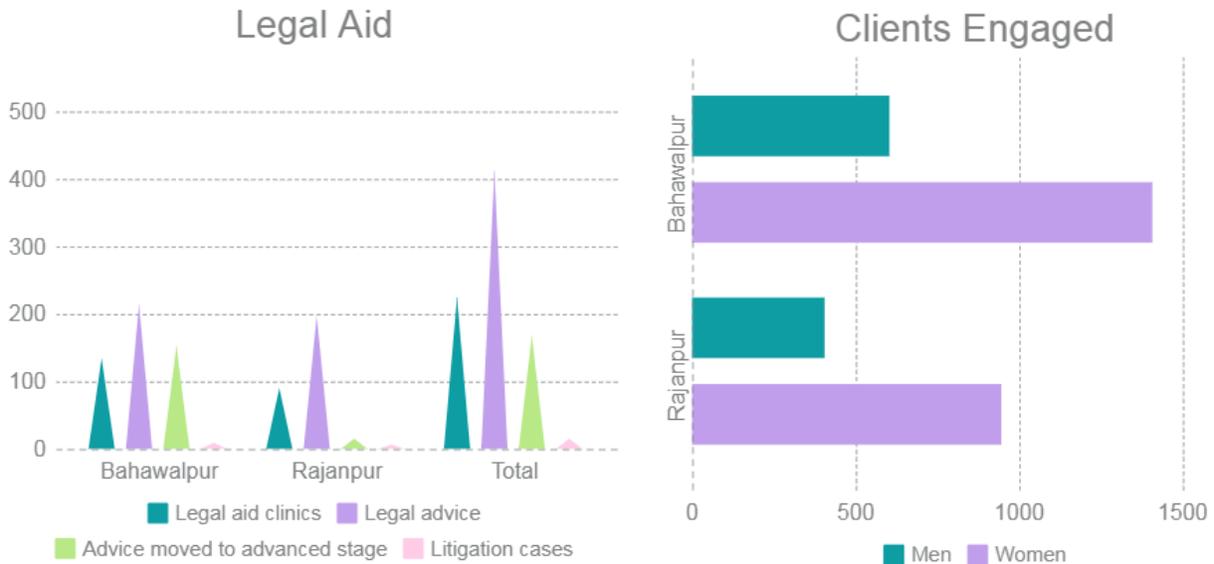
Zubaida Bibi, resident of UC Mari Sheikh Shijrah, Bahawalpur and single mother of five, managed to save enough money to afford electricity. Having only the few overhead lights on the grid, her monthly bill varied between Rs. 250 and Rs. 1,000 at most. Once WAPDA changed her meter, Zubida Bibi's monthly bill unexpectedly soared to Rs. 13,000. Shocked and worried about paying the large amount, she approached the local paralegal for help. In consultation with the district project team that discussed the issue with WAPDA officials, the paralegal advised Zubida Bibi to visit the WAPDA office in Bahawalpur with her electricity bill. It was discovered that the meter reading increased due to technical reasons. The bill was subsequently reduced to Rs. 8,000, to be paid in easy instalments in 8 months, without any threat of electricity being cut off. Zubida Bibi breathed a sigh of relief and thanked the paralegal and project team.



Pathani Mai, resident of UC Tattar Wala and owner of a small, local grocery business, was saddened to discover her husband's corruption in the pricing of grocery items. When she confronted him about charging customers rates much higher than the market prices and misusing the profits, he physically attacked her and expelled her from the house. Pathani Mai, previously adamant on resolving the issue privately, finally approached the community paralegal for mediation. The paralegal arranged a meeting for discussion simultaneously with both parties in a neutral space and educated Pathani Mai and her husband on relevant laws. Informed of his wife's as well as consumer rights, Pathani Mai's husband admitted his wrongdoing, tended an apology and offered to welcome her back into his house along with the promise of fair dealing in the future. Pathani Mai remains grateful to the paralegal for resolving her problem and building trust between the couple.

Legal Aid Clinics

Each district has a legal aid lawyer who conducts legal aid clinics in local communities at LSO offices. The objective of these legal aid clinics is to invite women and men who are facing legal issues for advice or support. During the reporting period, both districts managed 224 legal aid clinics during awareness-raising sessions. 411 legal advices were delivered through these legal aid clinics as well as individual consultations with the clients. 167 of these 411 cases advanced to the next stage whereby clients submitted legal documents for further legal processing, while 15 cases proceeded to litigation according to the need and consent of the clients. Following are the major areas of legal advice, family issues, such as maintenance of child or wife and domestic violence, civil documentation, cancellation of marriage, child rights, inheritance, harassment, attempt to rape, exceeded bill of electricity and obtaining of financial support.



MOU Collaborations

District project teams approached 22 entities – both government and civil society organizations – and orientated them on the legal empowerment project and mutual areas of interest for the broader benefit of rural community members. The project staff commended the representatives of entities such as NGOs advocating women and/or human rights, BISP, Education Department, Aurat Foundation, Sadat Foundation, social welfare advocates among others for joining hands to legally empower rural communities in targeted districts. 15 of the 22 entities signed memorandums of understanding for the extension of their support for the duration of the project. Some government institutions, such as NADRA, however, displayed reluctance due to the Ministry of Interior’s recently imposed restrictions on participation in non-government initiatives.

Legal Aid Services for Complicated Cases

The foremost challenge in rural communities is a lack of awareness of legal rights, while affordability of counsellor fee is difficult for community members who are aware of their rights. The legal empowerment project’s awareness raising sessions and legal aid clinics followed by free

legal aid also restored confidence of rural community members, specifically women, on the rule of law. Consequently, 15 cases of male and female clients progressed to litigation with their consent.

The criteria for moving cases to litigation depends entirely on the legal awareness and decision of victims. Selective cases are moved to litigation due to budgetary limitations of the project. Therefore, only 15 clients decided to forward their cases to litigation after two consultations with legal aid officers to ensure that all other workable options, such as mediation and reconciliation, were exhausted first. The project legal aid officers took up the cases and filed suits in court in accordance with the project's aim of provision of free legal aid. 2 cases were subsequently withdrawn due to out-of-court settlements, 2 secured verdicts in favor of the project clients, and remaining are in court. Furthermore, 5 cases – 3 in Bahawalpur and 2 in Rajanpur – that consisted of husband-wife disputes over maintenance or birth of baby girls were resolved through traditional justice systems such as *jirga* or *panchayat*.

District	Union Council	Type of Case	Litigation Cases	Status
Bahawalpur	Mari Sheikh Shijra	Maintenance, dower articles, second marriage of husband	1	In process
	Jalalabad	Maintenance, dower, dowry articles, second marriage of husband	2	01 case degree issued by court in favor of project's client.
	24-BC	Maintenance, dower, dowry articles	3	In process
	Jimrani Kohna	Second marriage of husband, dower, dowry articles	2	In process
		Domestic violence	2	Resolved through mediation
		Breach of contract	1	Resolved through mediation
Rajanpur	Dajal & Umerkot	Cancellation of marriage	2	Verdict in favor of project clients
	Umerkot	Dowry, maintenance	2	In process
	Hajipur	Maintenance of child and wife	3	In process

	Tattarwala	Expulsion of wife on birth of 4 th baby girl	1	Resolved through mediation
		Corruption in family business	1	Resolved through mediation

District Legal Empowerment Forum (DLEF)

Three bi-monthly meetings were conducted with stakeholders in each district, Bahawalpur and Rajanpur in the reporting period in which representatives from government departments and civil society organizations participated. These meetings aimed to share the overall progress of the project with stakeholders, along with areas of support required from them for redress of identified issues and grievances. These meetings provided a platform to stakeholders to generate discourse on the legal issues of rural communities. Additionally, paralegals were also provided a chance to interact with stakeholders and present grievances, primarily administrative in nature, for timely response and resolution.

In the third bi-monthly meeting, project staff introduced the idea of formation of a district legal empowerment forum which was appreciated and 25 stakeholders in both districts displayed interest to partake in these forums. Subsequently, 2 district legal empowerment forums were formed with the aim to generate dialogue amongst key stakeholders, entities and other forums. Their purpose was to raise a collective voice on concerns with government institutions for the assurance of transparency, accountability and activation of legal empowerment committees.



Database Management System and Data Entry

The legal empowerment project allows two methods of data entry.

- Identified cases and their follow-ups are updated on an excel sheet
- Resolved cases are updated on Salesforce's online MIS

Various tools and instruments were developed at the initial stage of the project to track

project activities and gauge the performance of paralegals, evaluate high-risk cases, develop monthly reports, status forms, weekly reports and track litigation cases, awareness sessions, advice and follow-ups. Moreover, database management plays a significant role in project management, specifically with the technical details.

Technical Issue with Salesforce's MIS

Salesforce's MIS included a technical error whereby two UCs were not added to the dashboard. RSPN's IT department, however, enabled such entries with newly generated codes that will be rectified once the issue is resolved by Salesforce administrators.

Media Coverage

Given the current circumstances of the country, rights-based programs and initiatives face threats from dangerous elements, and thus avoid regular media coverage – both electronic and press. However, the media is still engaged at times to promote the project's message to rural communities and propagate awareness regarding legal empowerment among targeted groups and stakeholders. Radio programs on legal rights have been planned to promote legal awareness among a wider audience, particularly in the targeted districts.



Success Stories

During the reporting period, RSPN encouraged the collection of success stories. So far, 20 such stories have been collected from both targeted districts. The success stories primarily cover family laws, civil documentation, domestic violence, breach of contract, protection of child marriages and maintenance of wife and children. These stories are being refined for publication and dissemination amongst relevant stakeholders and civil society forums to inspire and cement the need for similar initiatives.