



## 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 Kashmore 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 15 of 15: Ms. Sharma Khatoon

*By Savaila Hunzai*

Ms. Sharma Khatoon lives in Bakhoo Chachar, a small village in District Kashmore of Sindh, with her four children: three sons and a daughter. She was second amongst the 10 children of a poor tenant farming family. The family did not own any land and worked on a local landlord's land. This was their sole source of livelihood. Given the large size of the family, they were always under resource constraints, particularly not having enough food to eat.



Recollecting her childhood memories, Sharma said that she was just twelve and had completed 2nd grade when she was forced to leave school and do work. The work involved collecting cow dung, weeding the fields, cutting the harvest, and undertaking domestic chores. Sharma said that she begged her mother to let her stay in school, but her parents did not think it would be fair to let a growing girl to go to school as she would be walking across the village. The family was afraid of some

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mishap with their daughter therefore, they kept her near the house and under their direct observation. This was part of the existing social norms of the area, i.e. girl's education has no importance, girls are temporary 'guests' in paternal homes, etc.

Soon after Sharma was married off to a man from Village Bakho Chachar and started living with her new family. Sharma's new joint family included her parents-in-law, two brothers-in-law and their wives and three children who lived in a single-room mud house. As productive assets, the family owned a buffalo, two goats, one donkey, and three acres of land where they cultivated rice and wheat for household consumption. Some surplus milk was sold. At harvest time, some wheat and rice was also sold. The income from these sales was never enough to meet the basic needs of the family. Sharma said that soon after her marriage, apart from household chores, she was given the responsibility of looking after the household's animals. Sharma said that although she worked very hard and made every effort to prove to be a good daughter-in-law, she had a difficult time with her mother-in-law and sisters-in-law, who treated her like a servant. This situation made Sharma very sad and often she became very afraid. Such was the situation that Sharma could not even think about visiting her own mother as this would give more excuses to her mother-in-law to curse her further. Despite this, Sharma carried on with her work and life hoping that life will improve.

After one year of her marriage, Sharma had a daughter and later with the gap of one and a half years between the children, she had three sons. There was no awareness about mother and child healthcare; following traditional practices was the norm. One of her sons passed away soon after his birth. Sharma said that she worked in the fields till the very end of her pregnancy.

One day, she was working in the fields harvesting crops, when her labour pains started. She started to move towards her home and the baby was born on the way home. Soon afterwards, her son passed away. Sharma said, "We had brackish ground water that was not suitable for drinking purpose. To fetch drinking water, we had to walk for an hour to another village. We used the fields for defecation. We went out very early in the morning or in the late evening. In sickness, we relied on traditional herbs and homemade remedies."

Although Sharma's husband contributed to the household's farming activities, her sisters-in-law and brothers-in-law always found some excuse to complain. They complained about Sharma not working even when she was sick. Intra family arguments, disputes, and fights eventually made the situation unbearable for all. Finally, a decision was made to split the family. Sharma's father-in-law and husband built a single-room mud house. Sharma moved to this mud house with children and husband. From the three acres, Sharma's father-in-law allocated her husband one acre of land, where they cultivated rice and wheat, as well as some winter peas. Sharma said that the family split did not ease her financial situation. Her family still faced many problems however the mental torture of fights with her in-laws was now over.

Sharma said, "When the SRSO field staff visited our village for the first time, our men did not allow them to interact with us. They were called strangers, and according to the social norms, women were not allowed to interact with strangers. However, SRSO staff continued to visit the area, and eventually some of the families were convinced and they allowed their women

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to meet with the SRSO team. However, my husband and father-in-law had strictly prohibited us from meeting them. The main reason for this was their lack of trust in fellow village men; therefore, it was even harder for them to trust the outsiders. The village environment was generally not considered secure for females. We lived in constant fear. This fear was about someone passing bad comments or remarks about us and that this would then anger our family men. Due to this fear, our life was bound to the house and the farm fields”.

Sharma continued, “In our neighbourhood, SRSO’s field staff started to have monthly meetings with women. After a couple of months, my neighbours visited me for some reason and told me about SRSO’s programme and its benefits. I was saddened to know that I was left behind and could not become a member of Community Organisations (CO) that our neighbours had formed. When my husband returned home from the fields, I locked myself in the house and began to cry and begged his permission to attend the meetings with the neighbouring women.

After a long session of crying and arguing, he finally relented but on one condition that I should not blame him if anything went wrong after my becoming a member of CO. I came out of the house and finally was able to join the local CO.”

After Joining the CO, Sharma learned that the CO had a president and a treasurer, who had received training by SRSO. She started to regularly attend the meetings. Sharma said, “The CO was named as Haq Bahu, after the name of our Peer Murshid (Sufi saint). CO became a social forum and we gathered there to share our problems and to seek solutions to them. In the beginning, it was very exciting for me trying to remember the date of our CO meeting. Before, we did not care about dates, months, and years. We did not know that a thing called calendar existed.”

SRSO had conducted the Poverty Scorecard census in Kashmore district. Results from this poverty census were shared with each household. Sharma said that she too was given the result of the poverty census. Her poverty score was 10. She remembers that in one CO meeting, she was asked about what she wanted to do to improve her poor condition. Sharma recalled that her diet at home was basic and not very nutritious. The family often ate less than the required amount. Sometimes there was no food at home. She said, “In the years low harvests, my family relied on charity from a wealthy landlord and also my husband worked as a day labourer to make ends meet.” In this situation, Sharma felt that she should aim to have some goats that would provide milk and also become important economic assets. Children will also have goat milk to drink.

Through the CO, Sharma got to know about Community Investment Fund (CIF). She applied for and received a CIF loan of Rs. 9,000 (USD 90) in December 2009. She bought a goat with this money. After few months the goat produced two kids. Everyone, especially the children were happy now. In 2010, the super flood hit the area and like others, Sharma’s family had to leave the village. The family found refuge in a relative’s house in Kandhkot town. She remembers that her stay was very uncomfortable as they, along with their livestock, had become dependent on their relatives. Soon after, Sharma learned that SRSO had set up emergency camps for flood victims. Thereupon, her family moved to one camp site, where

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they stayed for one month. SRSO and other NGOs provided food aid to the camp residents. Due to lack of adequate feeding, their goat became feeble and finally died. Sharma somehow managed to save the two kids.

Two months after leaving the village, Sharma and her family returned. They were shocked to see the condition of the village; their homes were destroyed and farm fields were under water. SRSO provided the family with a tent as a temporary shelter, and food for two months. In the meanwhile, the menfolk of the village got together, collected branches and straws, and made mud bricks. With these materials they made simple mud houses. Family members also managed to catch some fish from the flooded fields.

Sharma continues with her story, "Our lives became more vulnerable when viral diseases spread in the village. We did not have access to safe drinking water. We drank stagnant flood water to quench our thirst. Even our livestock became susceptible to diseases. Many households lost their cows and buffaloes. Also, the streets were muddy, we could not move easily. So, here we were, with very little to eat, dirty water to drink and living in mud."

Given the issue of widespread livestock disease in the area, SRSO organised training for community based para-veterinarians. Sharma was selected by her CO to attend the training. Upon return, Sharma began to provide basic veterinary services to community members at a small cost. She charged Rs. 150 (USD 1.5) per visit. CO members also requested SRSO to provide hand pumps so that the community members can have safe drinking water. After a survey of the whole village, SRSO installed water hand pumps throughout the village. Sharma said that for every three households, one water hand pump was installed.

In 2011, Sharma sold one of her goats for Rs. 9,000 (USD 90) and returned the CIF loan that she had taken in 2009. Sharma said, "My husband suffered from malaria, and it took him a very long time to recover from the sickness. He could not work in the fields. We relied on charity for some months. We also went hungry some times. We became helpless when our children asked for food. In order to try to get back on her feet, Sharma applied for and received another CIF loan in 2011. She said, "As part of his inheritance from his father, my husband was given a donkey. This became a burden for us. We worked hard to feed it but it was of no use to us. With the CIF loan, I bought a cart. Now my husband drove the donkey cart and would rent out his services for small amounts. He began to earn about Rs. 60-80 (USD 0.6-0.8) per day. On a good day, his earnings went up to Rs. 200 (USD 2)."

Sharma herself attended another training provided by SRSO. In this training, she learned to make Rillis (traditional floor/wall covering) and appliqué art. Now she makes Rillis and appliqué work for the fellow villagers. Sharma said, "The villagers provide me with the inputs, and I do appliqué work on fabric and Rillis. I charge Rs. 150-200 (USD 1.5-2.0) for my labour to make a single piece. This has allowed me to contribute to my family income."

Sharma continued, "CIF through the CO was life changing event for me. Today I am able to rebuild my livelihood. In 2015, I took another CIF loan of Rs. 9,000 (USD 90) and after adding some amount from my savings, I bought a calf. Now, it has grown and become a cow and

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produced a calf. We use the milk for household consumption. I look forward to raising the calf and sell it out for more than Rs. 50,000 (USD 500).”

Sharma concludes her story, “Our income sources have become diversified. My husband is working with his donkey cart. I provide services and make Rillis. We now have good assets. More than income, we have also witnessed a change in social norms. Now there is more focus on education. My eldest child, my daughter, missed out on education due to our poverty, but second child (a son) is attending school. The youngest son will also start school when he grows up. All these changes could not have happened without us women getting together into our Community Organisation. We are thankful to SRSO for all their social guidance and financial support. We have, in many respects, broken the cycle of poverty. Now, we look forward to a much better future for us and for our children.”

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