



## 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 3 of 15: Ms. Ruqeeena Shahid

*By Savaila Hunzai*

Ms. Ruqeeena Shahid, 25, lives in Village Rasoolabad of District Kashmore. She is the eldest of her four siblings. Ruqeeena's father worked as a labourer in a local rice mill while her mother stitched clothes for the fellow villagers. Thus the parents managed to provide support to their family. The family lived in a single-room mud house. They did not own any land or livestock. Ruqeeena said that she was only 15 when her mother passed away, putting the responsibilities of her siblings upon her. She quit primary school to look after her siblings. Life was very hard for Ruqeeena.



Ruqeeena narrated, "One day a group of men visited our village in a vehicle. The village men assembled in the Autak (community meeting room) to receive them there as it was unusual for us to see strangers in our settlement. Our men met with them in Autak. After the meeting, I came to know that the visiting team wanted to work with local women and that our men banned them to revisit the village again. The men thought that the village women might run away with the visiting men."

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After a couple of weeks, another team visited the village. This time, the team included female members as well. While the male members stayed in the vehicle, the visiting female members met local women and asked to convince their men to allow SRSO to work with them. Ruqeeana, being young and literate among the village women, understood the message. Subsequently, Ruqeeana made efforts to convince the elderly women to talk to menfolk and to allow SRSO to work in the village. Ruqeeana said that she even requested her father to allow her to meet with the SRSO staff members. Initially he refused but then Ruqeeana started to raise voice against his decision.

With several visits by the SRSO team, 15 women were allowed by their menfolk to meet with SRSO's team. Ruqeeana said, "A female social organiser from SRSO conducted the meeting. She explained SRSO's approach. She told us about the importance of getting together to set up our own organisation. She gave the example of the finger and the fist: one finger is weak but when all fingers are curled together, then they make a strong fist. We understood the message. And in 2009, we all agreed to set up our own Tanzeem (Community Organisation). We selected Farzana as our President. We named our newly formed CO as CO Farzana, as it was easier for the CO members to remember the name. We received training on how to conduct CO meetings, initiate savings, and record keeping. Afterwards, we conducted the meetings without the support of the Social Organiser."

Ruqeeana continued her story, "Our meetings formally started with recitation of a verse from the Holy Quran and the president would ask each one of us to introduce ourselves. Afterwards, we discussed the problems we faced and how to seek support from SRSO to resolve them. Since most of us were suffering from extreme poverty, we passed a resolution seeking support for income generating activities. In the same year, SRSO introduced Community Investment Fund (CIF) and many CO members accessed this facility."

Ruqeeana said that with her mother's death, one important source for the family's income was gone. Now the family solely relied on her father's meagre wages to make ends meet. Ruqeeana had learned stitching dresses from her late mother, but she did not have a sewing machine. The family had sold their sewing machine to pay for her mother's medical bills during her illness. Ruqeeana claimed that in her Micro Investment Plan she identified the need for a sewing machine to support her existing skills for income generation.

Ruqeeana applied for and received a CIF loan of Rs. 12,000 (USD 120). With Rs. 8,000 (USD 80) from this amount she bought a sewing machine and the remaining money she spent on inputs such as fabric, laces, scissor, threads, etc. She started sewing clothes and would charge Rs. 150 (USD 1.5) per suit for stitching. Apart from stitching clothes for her fellow villagers, Ruqeeana made frocks for young girls and sold them as readymade garments in a local market in Khandkot. Ruqeeana said that from her earnings, she was able to return the CIF loan within six months. In 2010, the village was hit by a mega flood and heavy rains that destroyed houses and flooded the agricultural land. Ruqeeana said, "My family took refuge in a safe elevated place, where aid agencies provided us a tent and food." She said that after three months of living in the emergency shelters, they returned to the village. "The flood destroyed our houses and many had lost their land as well. SRSO team reached out to us to support us in rebuilding our houses. SRSO conducted a survey of destroyed houses and provided each of us a single-

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room shelter. Our men observed SRSO's services during and after the flood, and they began to show much greater trust in SRSO.

After reconstruction of the houses, CO members began to show more interest in CO matters as substantiated by the dramatically increased attendance at CO meetings," Ruqeeena narrated. In 2013, Ruqeeena again applied for and received a CIF loan of Rs. 13,000 (USD 130). With this money, Ruqeeena opened a small shop for her brother at their home. In the beginning, she kept a small inventory of candies, snacks, match boxes, spices, salt, soap, tea, sugar, etc. at the shop. Later on, by using her savings and profits from the shop, Ruqeeena extended the shop. Now the shop is a regular source of income for her family.

Ruqeeena said, "One of the major issues faced by the community was that the only functional school building in the village was damaged during the floods and the school was shut down. Schools in other villages were far away and many families could not send their children there. To tackle this issue, CO members passed a resolution for SRSO to consider. In 2013, with assistance from SRSO, a Community Cluster School was constructed on land donated by the community members mobilised by our Local Support Organisation (LSO). We continue to emphasize the importance of education in our CO meetings. SRSO and LSO partnership is benefiting hundreds of children to get quality education up to grade 10. I visit each household to convince parents and their children about the value of education, especially for girls. The result has been remarkable, now villagers encourage their daughters to get education."

Ruqeeena was delighted when she said, "The men in my village were literally stunned to see the new school building. They had never trusted and respected our abilities before. When the school became operational, they commented that – these ignorant women built this huge building within few months." She added, "The exposure through our CO has instilled in us a 'can do' attitude to improve our lives. I became aware about my rights and decisions. I was 18 when my father asked me to get married. Being an active, intelligent and literate girl of the village, I received many marriage proposals. I chose the one whom my relatives and father did not accept. I tried to convince my father several times, but he would refuse without any good reason. My husband was educated and good in manners; therefore, I defied traditional barriers and arranged our marriage at the court. My brother supported me throughout the process. I discovered that through awareness about my rights, I was able to fight the pressure of the traditional social norms that never allowed girls to choose their groom."

In 2015, Ruqeeena applied for another CIF loan and received Rs. 15,000 (USD 150). Adding Rs. 15,000 to the CIF loan from her savings, she bought a laptop for her husband. She said, "My husband uses the laptop to download songs and videos from the internet and sells them to the local villagers. He earns about Rs. 500-700 (USD 5-7) per day from this activity. We have already returned the CIF loan from his earnings."

Ruqeeena said, "The village environment was polluted and unhygienic. Practices at our household level were very different. We used to cook our meals near our livestock. The stagnant water in the streets, open defecation, and unavailability of proper drainage system resulted in the spread of viral diseases such as malaria and typhoid. Due to lack of knowledge about diseases, parents left their children playing in the muddy streets and contaminated

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water. Subsequently, all earnings were spent on treatments. This in turn brought many other issues such as arguments and domestic violence.”

Ruqeenaa added that these issues were discussed at the platform of CO and VO. Then, SRSO provided awareness sessions about housekeeping and sanitation. Later, another NGO also provided training sessions regarding children's health and hygiene. SRSO provided us latrines to avoid open defecation and the other NGO financed the villagers in pavement of streets and setting up kitchen gardens. Ruqeenaa said, “Now, people must build latrines while building their houses.”

Talking about the community's accomplishments through CO, VO, and LSO, Ruqeenaa said, “By getting organised in our own organisations we were able to bring many changes in our village. Through the support of SRSO, we received CIF loans to improve our incomes and strengthen our livelihoods, build a school for our children, pave our streets, and construct latrines. One major issue is that we still lack electricity. We contacted the Deputy Commissioner's (DC) office. All women went to the DC's office and complained that we are all citizens and cast our votes then why do we not have the right of getting electricity. If the landlord can have access, why can't we? The DC took notice because the crowd was huge. He sent one of his employees to the village to conduct survey, and he found out that the whole Union Council does not have access to electricity. After a week, we received an agreement from the government officials that an electricity transformer will be installed in our village.” Our men were jubilant and said, narrates Ruqeenaa, “We have been living in this village for years. Neither our forefathers had the courage to speak up nor did we. Our women have challenged the government and the landlord to get our rights. Our women brought light to our houses.”

Ruqeenaa concludes her story by narrating, “Being a woman in this social setup was once a huge challenge. Firstly, they ignored us, then they restricted us, then they fought with us, and then we won. Now, our men allow us to attend training sessions in other cities as well. This was only possible because we developed our own social pillar based on COs/VOs/LSOs. We have now realised the power of collective action. Now even the landlord visits our organisations at election time to request us to vote for him. In the last elections, we had promised him to vote if he would agree to our conditions. He agreed to fulfil the promise of giving dowry to poor girls who could not get married because their families could not afford their dowry. Bringing change is difficult but our example has shown that change can be brought if the poor women are organised. I am most grateful to the Government of Sindh for supporting SRSO to support us.”

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