



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 5 of 15: Ms. Shabiran

By Savaila Hunzai

Ms. Shabiran, 45 years old, lives in Arslan Khan Bhegrani Village of Kashmore district. She was born in a nomadic livestock herding family and hence grew up living and roaming in different areas. She was the sixth out of her eight siblings: six sisters and two brothers. Shabiran said that the family's constant moving never allowed her to develop any strong attachment to any one locality. Her family owned livestock and they were constantly moving in order to graze them. Shabiran learned about undertaking household chores. One activity that consumed most of her time was fetching water for the family. Also, being constantly on the move naturally meant that Shabiran could not attend any school.



According to the existing social norms, parents sought to marry off their girls at a relatively young age. So, as soon as Shabiran reached the age of 13, her family began looking for a suitable husband for her. Finally, Shabiran's father arranged her marriage to a man from Arslan Khan Bhegrani village.

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Shabiran said, “My new life was way better than with my parents. My husband’s family were settled and were sharecroppers. Our joint family had 18 members who all lived in one big hut that we called home. We had electricity and ready access to drinking water; however, for defecation we went out to the fields in early mornings or in the evenings. Initially, I was happy with my new family. Soon after the wedding, I started to join the household womenfolk in undertaking domestic chores and on their visits to the farm fields. I would do weeding and help out at harvest time. I would also collect cow dung and make dung cakes. Collecting dry branches and twigs would also take up some of my time. From our two buffalos, we had milk, some of which was consumed at home and the surplus was sold to generate cash income. After months of back breaking farm work, and after paying off our debts to the landlord, the share of the harvest that the family received was never enough to meet the large family’s various needs. Therefore, in post-harvest lean seasons, my husband and his six brothers worked as daily wage labourers, sometimes at the local rice mills, sometimes on road construction sites.”

Shabiran said that after one year of her marriage, she gave birth to a baby girl. Later, with the gap of about one year between each child, she had 10 children; six sons and four daughters. As the family kept on extending, pressure on existing limited resources increased. This led to various disputes and arguments in the joint family. Therefore, the family elders decided to split the family. Shabiran said, “After the split my family was left without shelter. Our landlord allowed us to put together a hut on his lands. We collected some branches and straw, and finally put together a hut to protect our children from the summer heat. During the rains the hut roof leaked and the floor would get muddy. And, it become difficult to make fire to cook meals. As part of his inheritance, my husband received a wet buffalo. I would spend hours collecting green grass and weeds to feed the buffalo. We had to sell the milk to fulfil the household’s very basic needs.”

Shabiran and her husband continued to work as sharecroppers and the net benefits were never enough to feed her large family. Shabiran said, “Our condition was so bad that I was compelled to make a heart-breaking decision to send my young sons out to search for labour. I did not worry about their education; my top most concern was to feed them. I thought that if they find some labouring opportunity then they will be able to eat.”

One day Shabiran was socialising with her neighbours, when two outsiders (a male and a female) visited them. She remembers that the visitors had said that they were from an organisation called SRSO and that the organisation wanted to support local women who are willing to help themselves. Out of curiosity, Shabiran and her neighbours asked one question: “How can we help ourselves?” The female visitor said that the local women can begin to help themselves by getting organised and becoming members of their own Tanzeem (Community Organisation). The members will select their own leaders, meet regularly, and discuss their common and individual issues and potentials. CO will make plans and then SRSO will support them to implement the plans. Shabiran said that this message seemed promising therefore the local women agreed to set up a CO. Then the SRSO team filled a questionnaire⁴ and left.

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Shabiran continued with her story, “We were convinced that this CO must be beneficial for us, but we also had the fear that our men would never want us to meet with outsiders. We decided not to tell our men until we get support from SRSO. We spread the news among all neighbours and convinced them to join the CO too. Twenty women became members. The same week, SRSO team visited the village once again. They asked us to select our president and a manager to keep records and to name our CO. We selected our president and manager and named our CO as CO-Sindhu. Sindhu is the name of our river on which our whole livelihood is dependent - the river’s water irrigates our fields. We hoped that the CO Sindhu will become a source of our livelihood.”

Shabiran continued, “When we started to have our monthly meetings with the help of SRSO team, our men noticed our activities and began opposing us. At household level, each of us started to get warnings by our husbands and elders, but as we had liked our CO meetings, we tried to convince them by saying that the SRSO team has females who meet and interact with us. We told our men that we do not interact with the men. But they even said, ‘they will show you money, promise you easy life, and in greed you will leave your families and run away with them.’ SRSO team also held meetings with our men to seek their collaboration and support. Initially the men were very hesitant but after a few meetings, they finally agreed that we could continue with our Tanzeem meetings.”

In one CO meeting, the SRSO team presented the poverty scorecard results. All 20 women’s households had poverty scores of less than 18; hence all were eligible for loans from the Community Investment Fund (CIF) managed by the local Village Organisation (VO). All members prepared their Micro Investment Plans (MIP). Shabiran’s household poverty score was 13, and in her MIP, she highlighted that she had the potential to raise a buffalo calf but that she was constrained by lack of money. Shabiran received a CIF loan of Rs. 8,000 (USD 80) in 2009. With this small amount, Shabiran purchased a buffalo calf. After raising it for one year, Shabiran sold the calf for Rs 17,000 (USD 170). After repaying the CIF loan, the balance amount was saved with CO.

Shabiran said, “Just when life seemed to be getting better due to membership of CO, a very big shock hit us. The flash floods of 2010 hit our area and settlements, and destroyed our homes and flooded our farm fields. Like other families, we too had to vacate our homes and run to save ourselves. We all trudged along the roads and finally managed to find refuge in an emergency camp in Kashmore town. We lived a terrible life for one month in this camp, where we were given food and emergency tents by NGOs. After a month, when we finally returned home, we saw that our huts were destroyed, the settlements were muddy, and the fields still flooded. We used sand to cover the mud and settled down. For three months we lived under the open sky. One day a team from SRSO arrived to conduct a survey about destroyed houses and huts. Since we had lost our hut, we were selected for support from SRSO. However, the SRSO team said that before their support, we would have to build the foundations of the new shelter ourselves. Since we had no money we were forced to take loans from my son’s friend, who had a cement agency. We laid the foundation for a two room house. Once the foundation was verified, SRSO provided us financial support for construction of walls and the roof.”

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After construction of new houses, Shabiran and her fellow CO members passed a resolution seeking SRSO's support for the construction of a link road from their houses to the main road. She said that the existing pathways were muddy and slippery; also, the stagnant water was causing various diseases. While the parents worked, their children would play in the stagnant and polluted water and become ill. SRSO accepted the resolution and agreed to support the pavement of lanes. CO members and their menfolk worked to clean the lanes and then to lay the new pavement under SRSO's technical supervision.

In order to meet the family's needs in these dire times, Shabiran's husband and his three brothers worked as labourers in the reconstruction of the damaged infrastructure in Kashmore and Kandkot towns. With their earnings, the family members could get and eat adequate food. By the mid of 2011, the farm fields were ready and the family got back to doing agricultural work as sharecroppers.

Now that green grass and weeds were available again, Shabiran wanted to raise a buffalo of her own. She applied for a CIF loan through her CO and received Rs. 11,000 (USD 110) in 2011. With this money she bought a buffalo calf. After one year, Shabiran sold the calf for Rs. 24,000 (USD 240) and repaid the CIF loan. She saved the remaining amount. In 2012, Shabiran again applied for and received a CIF loan of Rs. 11,000 (USD 110). Pooling CIF loan amount with her savings, she bought a young buffalo. Shabiran said that she returned the CIF loan by selling some of the share of their harvest. Now she has a full grown buffalo worth at least Rs. 90,000 (USD 900). Shabiran said, "Recently, I applied for another CIF loan and received Rs. 11,000 (USD 110) from the VO. Adding some more amount from my savings, I have bought a male calf. We are all looking after it and hope to sell it at Eid-e-Qurban (Festival of Sacrifice) at a much higher rate."

Shabiran concludes her story with pride, "My decision to join the CO has also benefitted my children. My daughter, along with many other young girls in the village, received a four-month long tailoring training by SRSO. They also her with a sewing machine. Now, she stitches clothes for the fellow villagers on order. She charges Rs. 200 (USD 2) per suit and earns a decent amount every month. I am so sad that I could not send my five elder children to school due to various constraints. Now, I am glad that at least my three younger children attend primary school. Apart from CIF and training, CO has positively influenced our personal and social lives. Frequent CO meetings and participation in discussions have enhanced our confidence to speak up in social gatherings. Before, neither had we known how to speak nor did we have any knowledge to share. We used to fear our men, that our raised voices may agitate their mood. Today, as our opinions are respected in the CO, my opinions and decisions at household level are also respected. The decisions I made regarding livestock raising, household food consumption, children's education, arranging children's marriages, and household purchases were well respected and accepted. This is the difference that CO has made in my life, and in the lives of other CO members. I often think that it was a blessed day when the SRSO team first visited our huts."

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