

DAFPAK CASE STUDY

HAND-IN-HAND, ARM-IN-ARM



THE VHC MEMBERS OF CHAK 110 DB FACILITATE THEIR CRP WITH HER DAILY VISITS

Nestled down a dusty beaten path, a bright blue gate stood out amongst the earthy browns and greens dominating the rural scene. The gate was accompanied by a singular board, the words 'Local Support Organization' painstakingly painted on its front. This is where the Village Health Committee members of Chak 110 DB, a sleepy village in Bahawalpur, would pull together 'chitais' – woven straw rugs – and sit down together to discuss issues within their community.

Today was one such morning. Members had already gathered and spread a 'chitai' in the courtyard of the house. The 'Sadr' – what the locals call leader – of the Village Health Committee, Nasreen Akhtar, stood up. Her daughter, Irum, was perched to her left, the Health Committee's white register in her hands.

"Assalamalaikum and thank you for coming," Nasreen greeted everyone, looking across the floor to the group perched around all four corners of the straw mat.

The members stirred, and rumbled a greeting back in unison.

Nasreen adjusted the scarf on her head and continued, "As you know, today we will be discussing the progress we have made vouching for the practice of birth spacing within our community. You asked me to take charge of leading the Health Committee, and to lead by example by helping our village's Community Resource Person (CRP)."

She paused, and pointed to a chart paper taped to the wall of the courtyard.

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“But before I do, I’d like to begin with some good news! We are currently on track with the Village Development Plan we made together. We have successfully procured some school bags for village children whose parents cannot afford to buy them. What we are doing here together is going to make a difference in our community with time..InshAllah!” she exclaimed.

Nasreen clasped her hands together, and continued:

“When we first began our work in March 2018, the sound and sight of a door swinging shut in my face became an uncomfortably familiar sight,” she mused.

The village members listened on somberly.

“Much to my dismay only two or three women from the village were visiting the DAFPAK camps in the first few months. Women were fearful of what their husbands and mother-in-laws would say if they brought up the subject of ‘waiting’ before getting pregnant again. It felt as if despite my best efforts, I just could not get through to the community with my message,” Nasreen continued.

At this point, Nasreen’s daughter Irum, interjected, “I won’t be able to forget the memory of my mother returning from her first day of volunteering door-to door, looking defeated. It was a gutting feeling. I did not know much about childbirth spacing myself at the time but I realized this was something important for my mother. After she explained the benefits of the practice to me, I was convinced. I started accompanying her on her early morning rounds. I first-handedly witnessed the community’s hesitation in accepting our message, with the pressure to bear sons, in order keep their husband and his family happy. But how can we provide counseling to the women when their husbands refuse to let us meet them?”

Irum continued, gesturing towards some of the members seated, as Nasreen proudly looked at her daughter, “It became clear we needed the support of the men in our

community as well. Particularly for some of the more challenging households we visited, like the woman living in Bandar Basti, who already had 7 children.”

Nasreen nodded in agreement and gestured towards two men sitting across from where she stood. “Yes, exactly. I am grateful to you, Javaid and Basharat, for coming with us on our daily rounds to help us,” said Nasreen.

Javaid and Basharat bowed their heads in acknowledgement. “This work is important for our community, and we are here to support you however we can. That woman had already had five daughters and two sons in the span of ten years!” exclaimed Javaid.

Basharat chipped in, “And her husband was talking about wanting another son,” he said, raising his eyebrows. He added, “It was important for him to know that by not waiting for his wife to recover fully and take care of the children she already had, he was endangering her life as well as that of his children.”

The members murmured in agreement at their words. Nasreen sat down and added, “It took us three visits to get through to that family, but we did it. Working together, we can look out for one another in our community. Ever since members of our Committee started joining me on my daily rounds, we have managed to more than double the number of women getting professional services at the monthly mobile camps.” She smiled and remarked, “Now, let’s all resolve to stay steadfast in our efforts. By coming together, we can address other issues faced by our community. Let’s talk about what we can do to protect the children in our community by encouraging their parents to send them to school.”