

Programme Introduction

In 2008, Mr Shoaib 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 Shikarpur 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 of the community members 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.

Manzooran's fall and rise

Manzooran is 40 years old. She was born and raised in village Muhammad Ibrahim Soomro of Shikarpur district. Her family lived in a simple straw hut. Her father worked as a labourer on his brother in law's land while her mother stitched clothes for fellow villagers and also made *Rilli* (traditional floor coverings) to earn some income for the family. Manzooran said that her father was a gambling addict and most often lost all his earnings in gambling. The family relied on the mother's meagre earnings. Manzooran learned stitching clothes, weaving chairs and making handmade hats from her mother.



Manzooran was married in her own village at the age of 18. Initially, her husband was unemployed. Her father-in-law was a carpenter by profession who earned livelihood for the whole family. The family lived in a single-room mud house and a straw hut. The family did not have any land or livestock. After one year of her marriage, Manzooran gave birth to a baby girl. Later, with a gap of one year between each child, she had six children: three daughters and three sons. One of her sons died young. She said that after the death of their son, her husband started taking life more seriously, and decided to work and earn money. He took painting lessons from a teacher in the village. In four years he became a painting artist. He made decoration frames, undertook wall chalking, painted large posters and large banners on demand. Her husband's painting efforts went well, because there was demand for his work.

In the year 2000, the family migrated to Chak, a town in Shikarpur district, in search of a better life. She said, *“my husband’s work had more demand in the city; therefore, we decided to migrate to the city. Here, we lived in a rented house. As demand for art work was at the zenith those days, we were confident enough to take a loan from the bank. We took a loan from a bank and purchased a plot of land to build a house in Chak. My husband’s earning was sufficient for household needs and also for some savings. We saved money and repaid the loan. Again we took loans from the bank to build our house. We built a three room concrete house. Also, we admitted our children in schools.”*

The broader technological landscape was changing, and this did not bode well for her husband’s work. Computerised designing had started changing the market, and the demand for her husband’s talent declined. People ordered banners and posters from vendors who had access to modern technologies. This severely dented the family income, and gradually her husband found no work.

Her Husband said, *“the introduction of Panaflex machine in the market was a bad luck for my family. I did not find work afterwards. I had to return Rs. 500, 000 to the bank.”* The interest on bank loan kept growing, and the family could not repay the loan. Her husband started to work as a labourer with the groups that painted houses, but the income was not sufficient for the family. The family’s low income brought trauma to the family and Manzooran felt helpless whenever her children asked for their school fee.

One day some girls from her village came to her house and informed Manzooran that some outsiders had come to the village and they wanted to help the poor women in improving their lives. She recalled, *“they said the women of this area will have to come together in a group so that they can discuss their needs, problems and potentials. I went out in street and observed them. Our neighbours did not trust them and asked them to leave. Some of the villagers did not even want to talk to them. However, an old lady in the next street allowed them to sit in her house. I along with two other females from the village went there and listened to them. They said that they are from SRSO and they want to know that what the women can do to improve their economic conditions.”*

Initially, the villager’s had misconceptions about people from SRSO and their desire to work with females only; it was a huge challenge for the SRSO team to convince the villagers. However, SRSO team was successful in convincing few villagers who further explained the objectives of SRSO to others. Manzooran said that the village women asked her to join the Community Organisation (CO) that consisted of 20 females, initially. The CO members named their organisation, Marvi. Manzooran attended the weekly meetings where she learned that through this organisation she will be able to learn stitching clothes.

After some months of CO formation, SRSO came up with a vocational training programme for women in 2009. Manzooran attended the tailoring training. She said that she attended the complete course of the sewing machine, stitching clothes and embroidery work through machines.

In the same year SRSO team asked the CO members to fill the Micro Investment Plan (MIP) for their individual households. She said that she mentioned her desire for buying a sewing machine in her MIP. She received a loan of Rs. 10,000 from CIF of VO. With this money she bought a sewing machine and an electric motor. She started taking orders to stitch clothes

and charged Rs. 200-300 per dress. With the electric motor she was able to stitch 5-6 dresses per day. Apart from that she saved the money and purchased fabric to make hats for children.

Manzooran said that on festivals, she receives more orders for stitching. Her daughter has also learned to stitch clothes and she helps her during the period of high demand. Manzooran returned the interest free loan by stitching hats and clothes for villagers.

Meanwhile, her husband joined the Panaflex market as an order booker. For this work, he received a 5% commission per order. Manzooran said that during this period, she continued to support her children's education. *"If our children are educated, they will never suffer due to poverty,"* she says.

Her eldest daughter has just completed her intermediate level of education (grade 12) and now she has opened a tuition centre for the village children in one of the rooms in her house. She said that her daughter has 17 students. Her son studies in grade 11 and he makes french-fries and sells them in the street, on part time basis. Manzooran said that now her children earn enough money to meet their own educational needs.

The family has returned 60% of the bank loan. They look forward to the day when they will be debt free. Manzooran wants her children to get higher education, and she knows she will need more resources to fulfil her dream.

'I and my husband will keep working hard to educate our children, so that they will not face what we did.'