



## 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 11 of 15: Ms. Shahnela

*By Savaila Hunzai*



Ms. Shahnela, 29 years old, was born in Guddu city in District Kashmore of Sindh. Her father worked as a gardener in Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) and the family lived in the WAPDA colony. She grew up among her eight siblings: five sisters and three brothers. Shahnela says that life was easy then as all facilities were provided in the house e.g. electricity, natural gas for fuel and water. Shahnela's mother was a housewife, who also stitched dresses, made Rillis (traditional floor/wall covering), and embroidery for the family. Shahnela completed her grade eight and

learnt stitching, cooking, and embroidery art from her mother.

She was in grade five when her family decided to engage her with her first cousin. She explained, "As per tradition, girls used to get married at an early age. We were never asked about our consent for marriage. We accepted whatever our parents and elders decided for us." She was 17 at the time of her marriage. She said that her parents gave her a pair of golden earrings, an iron and a pair of shoes in dowry.

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Shahnela started her married life in a single-room mud house in Village Ahmed Ali Suhriyani, Her husband was the eldest in a family of three brothers and a sister. As an asset, the family owned one-acre land where they grew wheat and rice for household consumption. She said that the harvest was insufficient for the family's annual consumption. They also had to undertake labour work to meet the family's needs. Her husband did seasonal labour work in the local grain market. He loaded and unloaded the grain trucks and received Rs. 20-50 as his daily wages.

Shahnela explained that she had a hard time adjusting to a new life in village. She missed all the facilities of her maternal home. Like other community women, Shahnela had to wake up early in the morning to collect water from a shared hand pump which was located far away from her house. She helped her mother-in-law in undertaking household chores including cooking meals, collecting cow dung to dry and use as fuel. The family diet included daal (lentils), mustard leaves, potatoes, roti (flat bread), and boiled rice.

Shahnela's first child, a baby boy, was born after one year of her marriage. Later, with a gap of one year between them, she had four sons and three miscarriages. She said, "My eldest son is deaf and dumb. The doctors in a hospital in Khandkot city had told us that he could speak, but as he cannot hear, he could not speak either." She said that she did not know about vaccination and polio drops until very recently. Due to lack of awareness and facilities about maternal health in the village, she faced many challenges during her pregnancies. Shahnela said, "Apart from lack of awareness and health facilities in our village, our mobility was discouraged. It was considered a bad thing for a women to step out of the house without a male escorting her. I never shared my sufferings with my husband because I did not have confidence to say anything to men."

Shahnela further narrated, "I was pregnant with my second child when SRSO field staff visited the village in a vehicle. Seeing a vehicle in the hamlet was strange for us. All villagers gathered around it. Two men and a female stepped out from it and asked us to sit in a circle. Once we all sat down, they announced that they wanted to work with the women. They said that they will support us in improving the standards of our lives if local women agree to get organised in a Tanzeem (Community Organisation). They said they would keep visiting the village."

Returning home, Shahnela shared her desire of attending SRSO's meetings with her husband. She said that her husband was easy-going compared to other males in the family; he allowed her to participate in the meetings. However, elders, especially her father-in-law, opposed the idea. However, she managed to convince her family and they permitted her, while many women in her locality were not allowed to participate in the beginning. With the passage of time they managed to convince their men to allow them.

Shahnela said with a laugh, "We have given a very tough time to SRSO field staff in the beginning. We did not understand what they meant by Tanzeem. We took ten days to make a Community Organisation. It consisted of 21 females and we named it 'Benazir'. We did not have the courage to say our names initially. With the passage of time, we got accustomed to the meetings and started to talk. We selected the eldest two members of the CO as our

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president and manager because we trusted them and everyone could respect their advices. As the president and manager were illiterate, I helped them out in keeping records of meetings and savings.”

She added, “Our CO started to have weekly meetings where we discussed how we could improve our living conditions. We learnt how to manage household expenditures to save some amount in our CO account. In the beginning, most women were hesitant about saving money because none of us had access to household’s financial means or assets. Only men dealt with financial matters. We were never given money in hand. We could not utilise our existing skills because we did not have resources to buy inputs. The Social Organiser from SRSO asked each of us to highlight our potential, what we could do to increase our incomes. I knew stitching as I had learnt it from my mother, but I did not own a sewing machine. Therefore, I shared my desire to buy a sewing machine. While we all were hopeful about receiving support from SRSO, the 2010 heavy rains and flood hit our village. We saved our lives and took refuge in an emergency camp in a government school in Kandhkot city.”

Shahnela continued with her story, “Our houses were damaged. For a few months, NGOs provided us food and emergency aid and then left us. Our men worked as labourers in reconstruction of roads and villages. It took one year for my family to rebuild our two-room mud house. We could barely eat a single meal in a day. SRSO field staff revisited us after one year of flood. We restarted our activities in CO. As I had applied for Community Investment Fund to buy a sewing machine, I received Rs. 8,000 (USD 80) in 2011. I started stitching clothes for fellow villagers. I charged Rs. 150-200 (USD 1-2) for each dress and saved the earnings to return the CIF loan. My sister-in-law also learnt stitching from me and helped me complete the stitching orders while I got busy in CO activities. Meanwhile, my husband got inspiration from me to learn new things.

He learned cooking various food dishes in Kandhkot city and practiced it at a hotel. Now he works as a cook for some contractor and earns Rs. 12,000 (USD 120) as his monthly salary. I have convinced my husband to save a certain amount from his salary every month so that it will help us educate our children in the future.” Shahnela continued, “Also, being the only educated CO member in the village, I was selected as the Community Resource Person. I visited door-to-door convincing females to attend CO meetings. Also, I encouraged them to become active and finish their household chores on time and manage time for meetings. I received an honorarium of Rs. 3,000 (USD 30) per month. This enhanced my self-confidence and also encouraged my husband to support me in getting more involved in CO activities.”

Shahnela said, “In the beginning, many CO members refused to receive CIF loan because they were not confident about their ability to utilise it properly and return it. Also, most of them did not have CNICs. When I asked them to make their CNICs, their men objected, ‘women do not need CNICs. They do not need to do jobs, so why would they need CNICs?’ I tried to convince them but they made bad comments about me. The village menfolk commented, ‘you get salary to use our females’ CNICs. You are wasting our time. You are making our females rebellious.’ I shared my field experience with SRSO team and they opened a camp in the village to spread awareness about the importance of CNIC for every citizen. SRSO

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contacted NADRA and registered our CO members to make their identity cards. Once the women received their identity cards, they applied for CIF loans and took benefits from it.”

In 2014, Shahnela applied and received another CIF loan of Rs. 8,000 (USD 80). She bought a goat with this money. She said that after one year the goat produced a kid. After raising the kid for few months, she sold the kid and returned the CIF loan. Now, she has three goats as her productive assets. Again in 2015, she applied and received a CIF loan of Rs. 15,000 (USD 150). Adding Rs. 30,000 (USD 300) more from her savings, she bought a young buffalo. Shahnela said, “While I and my sister-in-law stay busy in stitching clothes, making rilis, and undertaking household chores, my parents-in-law look after our livestock. Recently, the buffalo has produced an offspring and has started to give milk. My family now consumes milk and we sell additional milk in the village. I have returned the CIF loan from my husband’s savings.”

“As the time elapsed, women, who earlier refused to join COs, also became members. Many COs were formed throughout the village. SRSO field staff kept visiting the village to ensure our timely meetings. With the enhanced courage and confidence from our income, we started to think and discuss about problems beyond our household level,” Shahnela stated.

One of the challenges that the villagers faced was the lack of a school in the village. Shahnela explained that the heavy rains in 2010 had destroyed the building of the only government’s primary school in the village. She said, “No one in the village was concerned about children’s education until we discussed the problem in a CO meeting. We passed a resolution to SRSO to support us in rebuilding the school. SRSO visited the village and asked us to collaborate among ourselves to allocate land to build a school. When all COs and Village Organisations spread the message, a chaos among menfolk emerged. The menfolk, especially the ones who had land, warned us and refused to donate land for school. After months of arguments among our men, a landlord donated his land that was located far away from our houses. We struggled to get a piece of land near our residences, but no one agreed to allocate their land. SRSO built a Community Cluster School and appointed teachers. Now, the school is functional. The landlords’ children also study there. As it is located far away and it takes two hours in rickshaw to reach the school, our younger children are unable to attend it. We send the younger ones to the government primary school in our vicinity that is now operational. We look forward to sending our children to the Community Cluster School, once they pass grade five.”

Shahnela concludes her story with pride, “We had never thought that we would be able to speak up. We had internalised that we are weak and we should not raise our voice. SRSO, through our COs has enabled us to get involved in social and economic activities. Now we are more confident and competent to play a bigger role within our households and in the community. We are now visible!”

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