



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 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 14 of 15: Ms. Meer Zaadi

By Savaila Hunzai



Ms. Meer Zaadi is a 43 years old lady, born and brought up in Village Ghulam Haider Khoso of Kashmore district. She was the youngest of her seven siblings: three brothers and four sisters. Recollecting her childhood memories, she said that her father worked as a munshi (book keeper) at a brick kiln on meagre wages. Her mother made quilts for villagers on demand. Meer said that as per local social norms she, like other girls in the village, did not attend any school.

Meer's parents arranged her marriage at the age of 18 to a man from her relatives. She said with a laugh, "He was at least 15 years older than me. As per tradition, I was not even asked about my willingness for this marriage. At the time of my marriage, my husband was an apprentice cook at a restaurant in Kandhkot town and earned about Rs. 10 (USD 0.1) per month. He used to hand over his earning to his mother. The family

August 2017

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Government of Sindh's Union Council Based Poverty Reduction Programme
Social and Economic Empowerment of Women
Household Case Studies from Kashmore District



of seven members, including her parents-in-law, sister-in-law, and brother-in-law and his wife lived in a straw hut.

Soon after Meer's marriage, she took the responsibility of undertaking household chores. Meer said, "My day started with collecting water from Peer's (local religious figure) house for household consumption. That was the only hand-pump suitable for drinking water. All villagers collected water from the hand-pump so we had to wait for our turn in the long queue to collect a single bucket of water. Then, I helped my sister-in-law in making breakfast for the family. We usually boiled rice for females and children and wheat roti (flat bread) for males in the family. We did not own any land. Our men worked as labourers to earn for the family. Females stayed back home, looked after the children and waited for our men to return home, and then cooked our second meal at night. We did not have any activity than socialising with neighbours the whole day. In the evenings, I would go out to collect wood pieces and dried cow dung to make fire for cooking purpose."

After four years of her marriage, Meer gave birth to a daughter. She said that later, with the natural gap of two years between every child, she had seven children: three daughters and four sons. Meer said that until recently, she did not have any awareness about family planning or child and maternal healthcare. With the increase in family size, they needed more resources and they faced food shortages more often. She said that in the days when their men were not fortunate enough to find labouring work, they had to take loans to feed the family. She explained, "Our men managed to take loans. We did not know from where and how they managed it. We did not have the courage to discuss about anything related to money and purchasing."

Meer remembers that women were restricted to the boundaries of their houses. Even in serious sickness, they were never allowed to visit any health facility. They relied on homemade remedies during illness. Women's mobility was strictly prohibited in the village. Meer explained, "Once my daughter suffered from serious sickness. I asked my mother-in-law to accompany me to take her to a hakeem, she warned me by saying, 'Do not even mention of going to any hakeem. Your husband would kill you if you mention it to him'."

Meer narrated that one day her husband came home in anger and said that they had a fight with some outsiders. For a week they (outsiders) had been repeatedly visiting the village and wanted to interact with the females. He warned us to not step outside the house. My mother-in-law became stricter regarding our mobility. For our protection, she fetched water by herself and kept an eye on us. One day, while she was standing in the queue to collect water, she heard women talking about Tanzeem. She heard positive things about the outsiders, whom our men had misunderstood. Returning home, she talked to father-in-law that the outsiders are not at all harmful. They have already started working with the females in the other villages. She said that the females at the hand-pump were praising them.

Meer Zaadi and her mother-in-law gathered more information about the outsiders from the females. They learned that the officers are from an organisation named SRSO and they work with the females to help them improve their living standards. Meer said, "My mother-in-law,

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Government of Sindh's Union Council Based Poverty Reduction Programme
Social and Economic Empowerment of Women
Household Case Studies from Kashmore District



being the eldest among us, asked our men to collaborate with the officers and asked them to help us too.”

The menfolk of the village met SRSO field staff to know more about their organisation and programmes. Meer said, “Our men questioned the SRSO staff that how our uneducated women will work or participate in your meetings when they do not even know how to speak? After many misconceptions were resolved, women were given permission to attend the meetings with SRSO’s field staff. Meer said that men also attended the first meeting and observed it. In the meeting, she learned that SRSO will only work with women. Women will get organised in Community Organisations (CO) and will choose their presidents. Meer, inspired by the officers in the first meeting, actively participated in the second meeting. She said that 21 women agreed to form a CO. Being the most active and trustworthy in the neighbourhood, the CO members selected her as their president. Meer said that four COs were formed in the village.

After the CO formation in 2009, Meer participated in a three-day training session about meeting management and record keeping in Sukkur. She said, “I had never stepped out from my village before. This was the first time when I travelled outside the village. I met many females from different villages in the training sessions. I learned to vocalise my thoughts and share my opinions. When I returned from the training sessions, CO members gathered at my hut to know what I had learned. I shared my experience and promised them to work with them more actively.”

Meer and her fellow CO members started to have their meetings. She said that she encouraged every member in the CO to share their opinion, discuss their problems, and save money. She had learnt that without discussing problems and writing a resolution, they would not get support from SRSO. Therefore, she asked females to come up with the ideas to improve their lives. Meer said proudly, “The first accomplishment we made through our CO was that we brought a hand-pump scheme to our village. Drinking water was the biggest problem in our village. All villagers shared a single hand-pump at the Peer’s house. We used to have arguments over turns. Therefore, all the CO leaders got together at the platform of the Village Organisation (VO) and passed a resolution to SRSO. After a survey, SRSO provided us four hand-pumps nearer to our houses.”

Secondly, the VO passed another resolution to SRSO for Community Investment Fund (CIF) to be utilised for income generating activities. Meer said, “SRSO shared with the CO members the results from their Poverty Scorecard Survey. Our SO had told us that CIF loans will be given to those with poverty score of less than 23. We made a list of eligible CO members and passed a resolution to SRSO to provide us CIF loans through local VO. My PSC was 5 and I desired to raise small livestock. I applied for and received Rs. 10,000 (USD 100) from the CIF in 2009. I bought a goat with this money. After six months, the goat produced two kids. I raised the kids and sold one for Rs. 12,000 (USD 120) when it was time to return the CIF loan.”

In 2010, the mega flood hit the village. Meer and her fellow villagers left their village and took refuge in an emergency camp in Kashmore. She said that when they returned to their hamlet, all huts were destroyed by the flood waters. They kept their children under the shades of

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Government of Sindh's Union Council Based Poverty Reduction Programme
Social and Economic Empowerment of Women
Household Case Studies from Kashmore District



trees and started to collect branches and straw to build their huts. SRSO teams arrived to conduct a survey for the Low Cost Housing Scheme. Meer said, "SRSO registered our names and provided financial support in building our houses. My husband and I built a two-room brick house with the money. It was much better than our previous hut."

To improve livelihoods, SRSO provided Vocational Training to the villagers. Meer's eldest son attended a 15-day long training session in Islamabad, where he learned repairing mobile phones. Returning from the training session, he started to work at a mobile repairing shop in Kashmore town. With the passage of time, he became a partner with the shop owner. Meer said that now her son earns Rs. 6,000-8,000 (USD 60-80) per month.

Meer said that the community women were also provided with training that enabled them to diversify their household incomes. Meer, along with other village women, attended a training session, where she learned making Sindhi caps. After successful completion of the training, SRSO provided inputs to the trained women to make Sindhi caps. Meer said, "In our CO, we have 11 women who prepared the first order worth Rs. 30,000 (USD 300). We were given the inputs. We just made caps and got money as compensation for our labour. Now, we make hats and sell them in the local market. With SRSO's support, we also participate in various exhibitions where our products are sold. We have attended exhibitions in Karachi as well."

Observing her unwavering contribution in rebuilding the family's livelihood, her husband allowed Meer Zaadi to actively participate to work for social causes at the community level. She said that she gained her husband's trust and confidence. She called out a meeting of the Village Organisation to discuss the post-flood issues that the villagers faced. She said that in a discussion in the meeting, they found out that one of the reasons of fatal viral diseases was muddy streets and stagnant water. They rallied to the District Commissioner's office, which linked them with the concerned government department, to build brick pavements in the village. She said that the department funded a project that covered 3 km of lanes with brick pavement in the village, which resulted in improved sanitation of their hamlet.

Talking about her services at the community level, Meer said, "After flood, we were homeless and helpless. Our children suffered from viral diseases. The standing water in streets and mosquitoes spread malaria. I led my CO members and rallied to the District Health Officer's office to seek medical support for the community members. Soon after, a medical camp was provided where we were treated free of cost."

Acknowledging her contribution to the community's development, all Village Organisations in the Union Council selected Meer Zaadi as the chairperson of their Local Support Organisation (LSO). Meer explained, "My motivation and courage to represent my people comes from being a member of CO and VO. This gives me strength. Alone I am no one. With the passage of time, people's trust and community's needs compelled me to speak up for our rights. As I started to get involved in social activities and accomplished developments, I felt happy. It gave me peace of mind. Throughout my journey with CO, VO, and LSO, I have developed the skills to articulate and vocalise our needs and talk about our rights."

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Social and Economic Empowerment of Women
Household Case Studies from Kashmore District



Meer Zaadi further explained, "In the local elections in 2015, when the landlord visited the village to seek votes for his party, our men directed him to talk to the women. Our men said, 'We will cast votes to the one whom our women suggest. Of course this created a lot of fuss. Just as before, the landlord started to warn us that we must vote for him, but we chose to sit and talk peacefully. All COs gathered and I asked the landlord to join and sit with us as we sit in our CO meetings. In the meeting, I announced openly, 'So far, you have looked down upon at us. You have never considered our troubles. However, now, you will have to listen to our demands if you want our votes.' He agreed to support us in every issue that we will be asking to resolve in the future."

Moreover, Meer voluntarily worked with Mary Stopes Society (MSS) to create awareness about family planning in the union council. She said that she invited the District Programme Manager to the LSO meeting and ensured her support in field coordination. Meer linked the NGO's field workers with the leaders of CO and they arranged workshops at CO level. Meer said, "In the beginning, we faced opposition from many regarding contraceptives, but with the passage of time people are accepting its importance. I suggest to the new generation of my UC to have only 2-3 children, so as to be able to raise them properly and give them good education."

With increase in her exposure to the outside world, she started to think about her children's future as well. She decided to send the youngest two to schools to get education. It was not possible for her to educate elder children because the family could not afford their educational expenses. Her elder two sons started to work at a young age to meet the household needs. The eldest son repairs mobile phones and the second one is a barber. Her three daughters have learned stitching dresses from a tailoring training provided by SRSO and they earn money by stitching clothes for the villagers. Now, as she has diversified sources of income, she can spend money on her younger children's education.

Meer concludes her story with great pride, "Not only did my decision of joining CO improved my household income, but also it has impacted our social wellbeing. I am looked up to whenever anyone in the village requires support. Even the landlord meets me with respect. With SRSO's support, we are witnessing a tremendous social change here. The role of women is now being recognised, and they are being heard. Insha Allah, the future will be much better than our sad past."

Disclaimer: This Publication is made possible with the support of Rural Support Programmes Network (RSPN) and Sindh Rural Support Organisation (SRSO). The content is the sole responsibility of the RSPN and SRSO and does not necessarily reflect the views of the Government of Sindh.

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