



Light of Knowledge

“Today, when my children come back from school, we mutually learn from each other. They teach me what they learned in the school and I teach them what I know. When I learned how to read and write eight years ago in Adult Literacy Centre established by LPH, I started feeling like I was suddenly coming into light; a light of knowledge which made me see my life more clearly and helped me do many things with greater routine: I can dial numbers on the phone, write down the numbers, and maintain the attendance register of my students at the embroidery school where I teach. Before everything seemed very dark.”

Noor Shad, house wife and embroidery teacher, village Guru, Birir valley, District Chitral

Village Guru is the emblem of Kalash tribes. It embraces the unique charm of centuries old Indo Aryan Dardic indigenous civilization and is considered to be the smallest religious minority of Pakistan. It has preserved its cultural traditions and adds a vibrant color to the already rich cultural heritage of the country. In the outskirts of the village Guru sitting with her friends under the shade of a huge tree near fresh green fields we saw Noor Shad. She and her colleagues were knitting small bit of lace with such beauty and skill, as they were meant to be presented as a souvenir to the



visitors coming in to their village. Noor Shad is in her late 30's. She is a housewife and an embroidery teacher. Greeting us, Noor Shad shared her story:

I originally belong to Rumbur village but I was married into Guru. From my childhood I cannot recall hearing of anyone in my village being educated enough to be able to read and write and same was my fate until I was in Rumbur, mainly because there was no facility for education in the proximity. It was around only 15 years back that the first boy from our village managed to pass the 10th grade in a school.

I was married off to a man suffering from a mental illness. Initially he was fine and then sudden fits made him lose sense. I was in a shock but helpless. How could I, an uneducated young girl support my family and my husband. I was not educated so could not even dream of a good job. In between the fits my husband used to work as a labourer but otherwise he could not return to work for months. Borrowing money was frequent and paying back was painstaking. We had a piece of land (2-3 Kanal) on which we would cultivate wheat and maize and that was the only relief I had. I cannot express the stress we experienced.



As my family grew bigger (3 sons and 1 daughter) I knew that this is no longer going to work and I have to strive for their lives. I never wanted my children to suffer the way I did. I heard about a Trust nearby that had started teaching women embroidery and tailoring. I knew a stitch or two myself so got myself enrolled and learnt much more. After completing the course, I got an opportunity to teach embroidery in the same center. Most of my students were from Kalash and they could easily understand my language and what I wanted them to learn. It seemed

easy though it was not. Being illiterate, I faced many associated challenges such as difficulty in counting the learners and maintaining their attendance record. Communicating with the other staff was the hardest, especially those who were not from Kalash. I could only communicate through signs and symbols. More often they could hardly understand what I wanted to say. I had no knowledge of the mathematical numbers so I never understood phone numbers and how they were dialed. I felt helpless not being able to use such a basic necessity. But still this opportunity was the stepping stone for me as it helped push my life back on track.

I always wanted to read and write. But a deep compassion had aroused within me when I saw the staff reading easily from the books and writing something in the registers of their students, which I did not understand. How keen I was to learn the same! In 2008 the LPH started an Adult Literacy Center (ALC) in our village and that was the turning pointing my life. I took this opportunity to learn how to read and write. I was in the first batch of learners that comprised of 15



to 20 women. My willingness and interest helped me learn quickly. My teacher Mr. Kareem Khan being the only matriculate in this village was assigned the role of teacher in ALC. He really encouraged me to learn so I learnt Urdu and basic Math. Once done with my own course I assisted Mr. Kareem in helping other learners as I believed while doing so I could practice and improve. The other women same as an example and came to me to learn and revise the lessons.

I learned that each and every task needs to be done in an organized manner. I have 48 students in the center learning embroidery from me. Now with me knowing how to read and write, I can take their attendance and maintain the attendance register without any help. Besides I now try to speak Urdu with staff though I am not perfect but still can easily communicate my point to them. I can easily remember or write down the phone numbers and dial them by myself without any assistance. All this has contributed in improving my work and my salary is raised to PKR 7,000 per month. The ALC was an excellent intervention which taught nearly a 100 women a year. However, in 2014 it was closed down because the project concluded. I really regret it as it was the only source of light for the women in this area.

Despite all these achievements, still the life is not as shiny as it seems. My struggle for the existence of my family is not over. My husband's health has deteriorated and treatment requires a lot of money. The only land I had was destroyed by the last flood and it is no longer cultivable. I have to borrow money to meet expenses but I can pay back the loan on a monthly basis as I receive a salary. On the other hand, I am very happy that my children go to school. My eldest is in 8th grade while my younger ones are in 6th and 2nd grades respectively. The eldest got admission this year in a government school. In 2010, a government high school was started in the area, prior to that children had to go to Bumburet which takes 3 hours on foot for attending high school. There is a public school here for the last eighteen years, operated by Agha Khan Rural Support Programme but it offers education up to the primary level only. And the apple of our eyes - my daughter - yes, she attends school too. She is in 1st grade! (Smiling, Noor Shad presented the interviewers with beautiful Birir handmade laces).

