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## Ordeals Turned into Blessings

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*“I still remember the first time ever that I stepped out of my house to participate in an exhibition as a stall holder but couldn’t make much profit. Time and circumstances are the best teacher. The LPH asked me if I was interested in working with women to produce more material. I started with a group of 20 women workers and today I have almost a group eight hundred women workers. I feel very gratified that my business is a means of wellbeing for my family and is a source of earning for 800 other families.”*

**Tahira Yasmeen, businesswoman, Hamlet Almadab in Bakhar City**

The temperature was around 42 degrees in the evening as we reached the house of Tahira Yasmeen. It was a newly cemented house of 5 rooms and the walls were not painted yet. The temperature was perhaps 2 degrees higher inside the house due to cemented ceiling. Her children were sitting in the patio and were busy in their studies, despite the heat. Tahira was busy in her kitchen cooking supper for the family. 48 years old Tahira Yasmeen lives with her family in Hamlet Almadab in Bakhar City. She got married at a very young age when she had just completed her matriculation from high school at the age of 15. After her marriage she completed her fine arts (equivalent to grade 12) privately. Her husband, Saghir Ahmed, was a science graduate but could not secure a job. He started working as rickshaw driver and now he has his own rickshaw spare parts, repair and oil shop. They have four daughters and one son. Tahira narrated her story as follows:



I enjoyed a dual relationship with my mother in law as she was also my maternal aunt. My husband, Saghir had a Bachelor of Science degree. We started our new life happily in a joint family system. In the beginning everything seemed glossy but as the time passed by, things started to get worse. Saghir could not find work and this became the main point of contention for the family as he could not contribute to the family income. Within a year the situation worsened to the extent that my mother in law alienated us from the family and gave us only a battered room to live in. The patio was not paved and in the hot weather the scorpions used to come out and it was indeed a horrible feeling of fear to live with. My in laws confiscated all my furniture and belongings. I still remember that we had nothing to eat and then Saghir borrowed PKR 1,000 from his friend to buy sugar, tea, milk and some potatoes.

In desperation Saghir started driving a rickshaw. It was such a hard time for us as the income was not enough to meet the needs. Sometimes my husband started to lose hope. At that time, I used to encourage and motivate him making him realize that Allah will never disregard his hard work and there is no shame in it. As the time passed by, I gave birth to our daughter and then to a second one. By that time, my in laws started saying that she is a curse and why I could not give birth to a son. But Saghir and I used to say that daughters are Allah's special blessings. As the family was getting bigger our expenses were



increasing and so were the needs. The income from driving the rickshaw was not enough so we took a loan of PKR 9,000 and started a Mobil oil and Rickshaw spare parts shop. To assist him, I opened a small grocery and clothes store in the corner of my house, by that time Allah blessed our family with two more daughters. I used to bring material from Faisalabad for my store and sell here; but that too didn't turn up a success and eventually I had to shut it down. The reason was that people

had borrowed items and never paid back. But I was not the one who loses hope and quits struggling.

I got admission in the institute named Sanat Zaar that was established by the government for people who wanted to learn skills. I took two courses, one was on embroidery and stitching while the other one was in running a Beauty salon. And then my son was born. We were so happy that our family was complete. Hardly fifteen days had passed after his birth that my husband suddenly had a bad allergy attack. We had to rush him to the emergency in the hospital. He could hardly breathe; his heart beat was sinking and so was mine. His situation was critical and he was referred to a hospital in Multan. He stayed in emergency for a week fighting between life and death. At last his condition stabilized and I heaved a sigh of relief. But then we found out that he had lost his sight and speech.

It seemed like the bad luck had seen our door, each time we tried to reach a certain point of happiness, then the next moment destiny had to test our limits. It was the first time that I started losing hope; I started worrying about the future of my five children. Everything seemed dark. Suddenly I felt a little hand jolting me, it was my daughter; she was telling me that "bhai ro raha ha" (brother is crying), her act brought me back to senses. At that moment the faces of my children screened in front of me; I realized that now it is I who has to take care and keep everything intact, my emotions, my will power and my family. I embraced my baby calming him down and then I asked the doctor if there is any hope of recovery.

The doctor gave me a hope and said that he will recover both sight and speech slowly. It took the whole month in the hospital but the good news was that my husband recovered though was weak due to prolonged illness. But this incident was the turning point in my life that I decided to make myself economically strong so that I may not have to beg for money in the hour of need. I decided to use my skills and opened a beauty salon in my home on a small scale. It worked a bit better than the store but again the income was not much promising as in this area where I live, most people are not well off and usually cannot afford salons except for very important occasions such as brides coming in. As a hobby on the side, I started embroidering.

One day in my salon a lady named Tasneem working for Benazir Income Support Programme came for services and she saw my embroidery work. She became my friend and invited me to participate in an exhibition planned in April 2011 at Lok Versa in Islamabad. I was happy as there were 5-6 months for the exhibition so I started preparing for it.

I still remember that it was the first time ever that I along with another friend of mine went to participate in an exhibition as a stall holder and was very nervous. I was not sure if people would appreciate my work as it was our first experience. As we reached there, Tasneem had arranged one stall for us. The material I displayed was worth PKR 140,000. The response was good but as we were new, not much profit was made and we sold material worth PKR 100,000. For two to three years I kept on participating in the exhibitions but could not make considerable profit as no one was there to help us learn. I also got to

attend a similar exhibition in Karachi. This time I displayed material worth PKR 250,000. I had prepared things with money I had taken as a loan. As I reached there and decorated my stall, in the evening I received a call that my father had died. I handed over the material to one of my friends and arranged my way back to attend the funeral. Afterwards I called my friend a number of times but she did not respond. Since then I neither got the money from her nor material. She hardly returned material worth PKR 20,000. I was



in deficit and had to pay back all that loan that I took for arranging material for exhibition. I learnt the biggest lesson of my life that day, never to trust anyone in matters that involve money; if you want to do something do it on your own and don't rely blindly on others.

Instead of losing hope, I gathered all my strength once again and decided to take my work to the local shop in Gomal market. I was sharing samples with the shopkeeper to see if I can fetch some orders and there I met with the representatives of Intercooperation named Rehana and Zia. On interaction I came to know about the LPH project. They shared that there are groups of women workers in village Jandi Sindh who prepare orders of embroidery work and their specialty is in cross stitch. They asked me if I was interested in working with those women to prepare the orders. I was very pleased as I needed more workers who could do quality embroidery as it was not easy for me to prepare all the orders by myself. They helped to link me up with the group of women. After having a look at their work I gave them some designs to work on; they prepared the designs very well and the material was readily sold in the market.

In this way the mutual beneficial interaction started: I used to get orders from the markets and handed over the raw material to these women to prepare the designs. Then, once the product was ready, I took it to the shopkeepers in the markets who had placed the orders. The products were sold at a good price and from the profit I paid these women the labour charges. I also became a trainer. I remember the first workshop in which I helped women in village Sadozai in Chodwan valley to learn cross stitch, shadow work and color scheming. For me the trips to the far away markets were very exciting. The project also took entrepreneurs like me on exposure visits to other big cities like Peshawar, Islamabad and Lahore to explore the market and establish contacts for further orders. In one of such exposure visits, I met with Fatima in 2015 in Expo Centre Lahore; she was the head of an organization named Dotchi in Gilgit who was working for the rehabilitation of disabled women. I shared my samples with her and she gave me orders to prepare. Now she is our regular customer and still I am working on some of the orders which she recently placed.

Similarly, during one of the exhibitions organized by the project, I met with the group from Swat that was working on making woolen shawls. We started buying shawls from them and did embroidery as per market demand with specialized stiches called "Katchay ka Kam" and "Kundi". The response was great. We also got a very good response from the exhibition in DI Khan and then in Peshawar. LPH helped me

link up with SABA Pakistan, the organization that works with entrepreneurs promoting their work and since then me and my group are at work on preparing their orders. I had started with a group of 20 women workers. Today we are a group of seven to eight hundred women workers all from District DI Khan and Bakhar that prepare the orders. As I look back over the years of my struggle, I see that I accomplished a



lot. And each time I count the blessings from Allah, I pray for the staff of LPH who helped me realize my strength and guided me through to the new world. From a worker now I am an entrepreneur. I managed to construct my house which once was only a broken room and now I have five decent rooms. I am satisfied that wherever we go and no matter how much fatigue we feel during our work, we have a home, a permanent shelter to call our own. No one can oust us from the house, no

one can snatch our belongings any more. There was a time when we had nothing to eat and now on each Eid ul Azha we buy two goats one from my money and the other from Saghir's income that we sacrifice as a token of thanking Allah for the blessings inferred upon us. I feel very contented that my business is not only a source of wellbeing for my family but is also contributing to keep the hearth burning for almost seven to eight hundred families where women like me are struggling each day to live a life of dignity.

In all such efforts I cannot forget the support of my husband and my children. I am proud of my husband as he stood with me against all ordeals and is very hard working. He has also extended his shop and is earning well. My children are going to school and they work hard and perform well in studies. My second daughter Mahrukh is a very brilliant student and is very good in using computers. She attained first position in this year's exams and wants to be a scientist.

I want to give the message to the people that in the remote areas like Bakhar and DI Khan who do not approve the act of women getting out of their homes in search of income. It is the hardships and circumstances that force them to go out and work for the family's survival. Important however is how we deal with people and how we maintain our dignity”.

