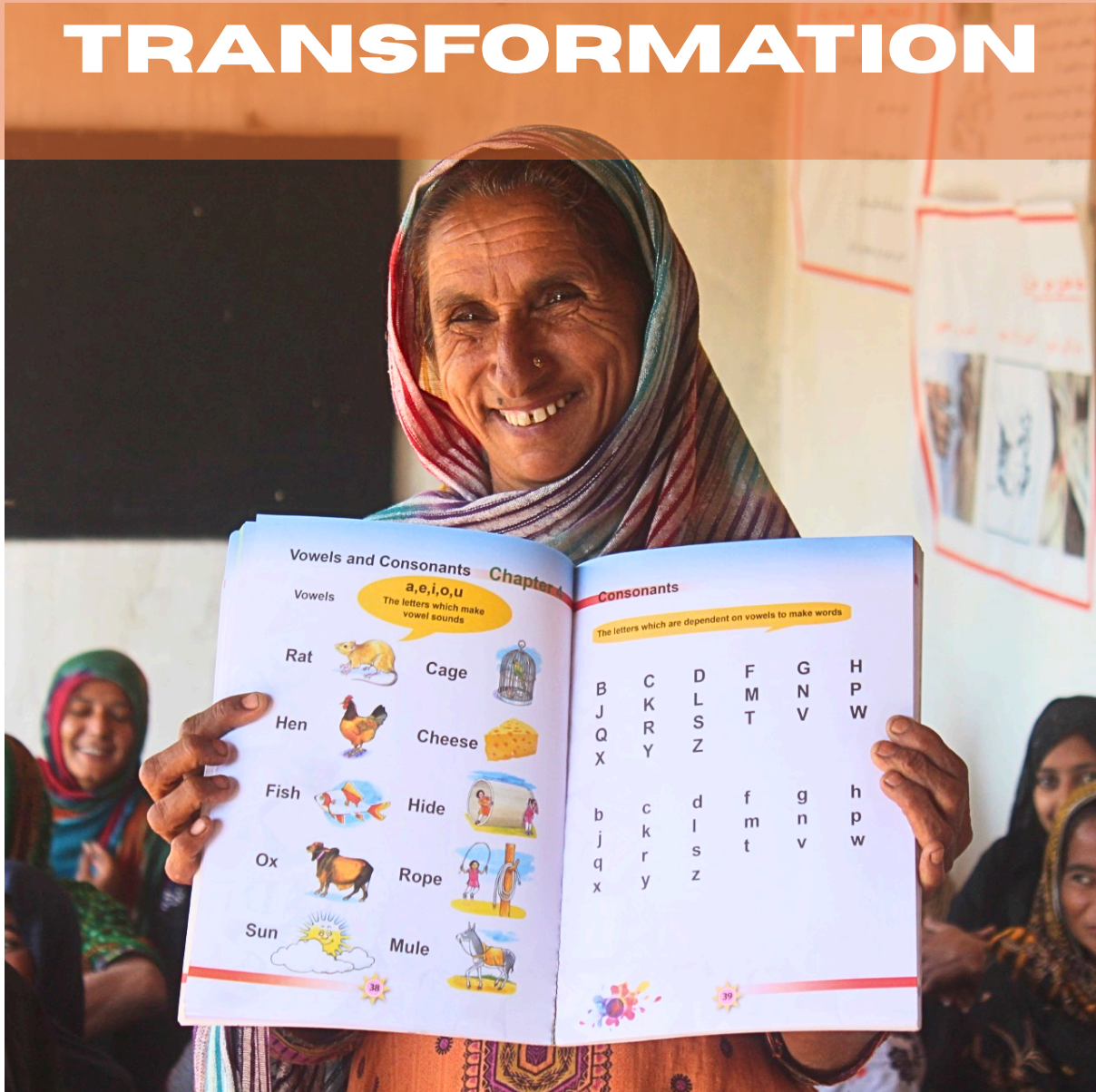




# FROM ACTION TO TRANSFORMATION



**Stories of Power, Empowerment, and Justice  
for Women Cotton Workers in Sindh**

**Sindh Community Foundation**

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## **Consent for Case Studies**

All case studies featured herein have been documented with the informed consent of the individuals involved. Participants were briefed on the purpose of this publication and voluntarily agreed to share their stories, names, and photographs. In one instance, a female participant provided verbal consent for her story to be included. However, to respect her privacy, no photograph has been used. We remain committed to ethical storytelling, safeguarding dignity, and ensuring transparency in all forms of documentation.

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**Shahnaz Shedi**  
Chairperson – SCF



**Javed Hussain**  
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## **Message from the Executive Director and Chairperson**

At Sindh Community Foundation (SCF), we remain steadfast in our commitment to empowering the unheard particularly women cotton workers in Sindh who continue to face exploitative labor conditions and the growing impacts of climate change.

Through the “Climate Justice for Women Cotton Workers” project, supported by the Commonwealth Foundation, SCF has advanced equity and resilience by integrating literacy, labor rights awareness, and climate adaptation education, while also advocating for the inclusion of women workers in social protection schemes.

Over the past year, more than 1,350 women workers and their families have been reached, and ten new trade unions have been formed amplifying women’s voices and leadership in the struggle for justice. These collective efforts are building momentum toward decent working conditions, climate adaptation, and labor rights protection in Sindh’s agricultural sector. By strengthening women’s knowledge, confidence, and organizing power, SCF is transforming vulnerable workers into informed leaders capable of shaping fairer and more sustainable futures.

We are deeply thankful to the Commonwealth Foundation for its continued partnership and trust in this initiative. Their support has enabled us to turn commitment into action and action into meaningful change for thousands of women who contribute tirelessly to Pakistan’s cotton economy. SCF remains dedicated to promoting inclusive, climate-resilient, and equitable communities where every woman worker can exercise her rights, adapt to environmental challenges, and work with dignity.

## ABOUT THE PROJECT

Women cotton pickers in Sindh province experience difficult working conditions, worsened by climate change. Rising temperatures (up to 48°C) and erratic rainfall expose them to health risks such as heatstroke and pesticide-related illnesses. Flooding disrupts livelihoods, leading to severe economic shocks. Despite legal protections under the Sindh Women's Agricultural Workers' Act 2019, these workers often face barriers to fair wages, safe working conditions and other basic rights.

With the support of the Commonwealth Foundation under its Open Grants Call, Sindh Community Foundation (SCF) initiated this 12-month project (August 2024 – July 2025) in 20 villages of Matiari district, including 10 newly selected villages and 10 older villages where SCF had already been active. The project combined literacy, rights advocacy, and climate education to empower women to advocate for systemic change, while fostering collaboration among trade unions, government departments, and industry stakeholders to advance women's labour rights and climate resilience..

This was achieved by:

- Conducting rights awareness workshops for 705 women trade union members.
- Delivering six-month literacy and numeracy training to 350 women cotton workers.
- Strengthening 20 trade unions through leadership and management training for women leaders.
- Equipping union leaders with advocacy skills to engage government on climate protection.
- Training 42 leaders on climate change, health, and occupational safety adaptation.
- Organizing two Women's Assemblies on climate justice, decent work, and health.
- Facilitating engagement with labour, climate, and social protection authorities and industry stakeholders.

## RESULTS

The project has strengthened the voices of women cotton pickers in Southern Sindh. Through literacy centres, 350 women acquired reading, writing, and math skills, enabling them to protect themselves from exploitation and make informed decisions. Eleven trade unions, comprising 385 members, now provide platforms for collective bargaining and recognition by the Labour Department. Climate literacy reached 1,350 women across 20 villages, enhancing resilience to extreme heat and disasters. 20 growers were sensitized on fair wages and safe labour practices. By linking women with institutions and building leadership, the project is reducing socio-economic and climate vulnerabilities while advancing justice.

## ✨ Key Impacts Achieved



### **350 Women Trained in Basic Literacy**

Skills in reading, writing and math → improved wage calculation, confidence and decision making.



### **11 Trade Unions Formed & Registered**

Strengthened collective bargaining power and gained formal recognition with the labour department



### **1350 Women Strengthened in Climate Justice & Protection**

Mobilized from 20 villages (10 new+ 10 old) in Southern Sindh → enhanced awareness, resilience and safeguards against vulnerabilities.



### **Thematic Impact Expanded**

Integrated women's leadership, right awareness and climate literacy → strong community resilience



### **Promoting Fair Wages & Safe Work**

Dialogue with growers and contractors → advancing compliance with the Sindh Women's Agricultural Workers Act (2019)



### **20 Growers Sensitized**

Engaged through dialogues → improved awareness on fair wages, safe work and decent labour practices

## Section I – Literacy for Dignity and Confidence

### Case Study 1: From Cotton Field to Classroom – Sahul Village, Khandoo

Married young and working for years as a daily-wage cotton picker, her life revolved around survival. Education felt distant and unnecessary until a small literacy centre opened in her village, and the first group of thirty women was invited to join. She hesitated, then stepped inside.

Classes ran three hours a day under Ms Rehana the village's only woman with an Intermediate certificate. Sitting on rough wooden benches, she traced letters slowly, whispering sounds under her breath until they formed words. Numbers once a blur began to make sense in daily life. "I can keep my accounts straight now. No one can cheat me even in the market!" she laughs, flipping through a notebook where she lists groceries, cotton-picking tallies, and small savings.

The change arrived quickly. Within three months she signed her name for the first time, read simple sentences, and calculated daily wages with confidence. "This programme is not just about letters and numbers it is a dream come true. I feel proud that I can write, read, and stand with confidence as a woman and a worker."

Literacy reshaped her home life as well. She now reviews school notices, checks expiry dates on medicines, and helps her children practice words at night. Her eldest daughter says the house feels different calmer, more hopeful because their mother writes goals on a page and works toward them. Neighbours noticed and enrolled; soon, the centre's benches filled early every day.

Most of all, she carries herself differently at work. She notes start and finish times, counts cotton carefully, and asks questions without fear. When a contractor announced a hurried weighing, she politely insisted on a proper reading. Her friends followed. The moment passed quickly, but it marked something new: the confidence to claim fairness.

She keeps one page in her notebook for dreams. On it she has written: "Tailoring course," "NIC update," "Teach my youngest to read early." She smiles when she sees the list because it proves something simple yet revolutionary: change can begin with a pencil. "I thought learning was for children," she says, "but it is never too late. Education has given me a new life."

**"I never thought I would ever hold a pencil,"  
recalls a mother of four from Sahul village, Khandoo**



**“When SCF representatives shared the idea of opening a school for adult women, I sold one cattle I had and built the room as a donation. My goal was that I and other women could get education.”**

## **Case Study 2: Aneesa – Literacy Brings Respect and Confidence**

For decades, fifty-five-year-old Aneesa from Muhammad Ibrahim Khaskheli village left only a thumbprint wherever a signature was required. Her days were spent in cotton fields from dawn to dusk. She could not read a clock, count wages, or send a simple message. “Earlier I could not write my name or even tell time on a wall clock. Now I can write, read, and tell the time,” she says, her pride unmistakable. Today, she no longer presses her thumb on documents—she signs her name with confidence.

Joining SCF’s adult literacy classes changed the rhythm of her life. Letters became receipts, numbers became pay slips, and the wall clock finally spoke. Most importantly, she learned to read the weighing scale. “Earlier the contractor would cheat us because we could not read the scale. Now I know the weight of 10, 20, 30, and 40 kilograms.” With this knowledge came negotiation power. She moved from exhausting ten-hour shifts to fair six-hour workdays, paid transparently. “Now I work for six hours until noon, and I am paid fairly for my time.”

Her learning inspired action beyond herself. When SCF looked for space for literacy classes, Aneesa stepped forward, donating a room from her modest two-room home. To complete construction, she sold a calf raised through a sharing arrangement.

That room now hosts around thirty learners daily. Inside, women practice alphabets, calculate wages, and plan savings. Outside, villagers call her “Baji”—an elder who gave from what little she had so others could learn.

Literacy also boosted her household economy. In the off-season, Aneesa makes and sells pickle batches, maintains neat accounts, and makes decisions with confidence. She reads health leaflets, checks medicine expiry dates, and writes reminders on a wall calendar.

The transformation is clear not just in skills but in dignity. Aneesa walks taller, speaks with confidence, and enjoys the respect of her peers. When asked what literacy means to her, she answers: “Respect.” Respect for time, wages, and rights. From a thumbprint of dependency to a confident signature, Aneesa’s journey shows how literacy creates both respect and confidence and opens doors for an entire community.



### Case Study 3: Hawwa – From Illiteracy to Community Contributor

For decades, fifty-five-year-old Hawwa from Muhammad Ibrahim Khaskheli village left only a thumbprint wherever a signature was required. Dawn to dusk in cotton fields, she could not read a clock, count wages, or send a message.

“Earlier I could not write my name or even tell time on a wall clock. Now I can write, read, and tell the time.”

Hawwa, 55, Muhammad  
Ibrahim Khaskheli Village

SCF’s adult literacy classes changed the rhythm of her days. Letters led to receipts; numbers led to pay slips; a wall clock finally spoke. Most crucially, she learned to read the weighing scale. “Earlier the contractor would cheat us because we could not read the scale. Now I know the weight of 10, 20, 30, and 40 kilograms.” With numeracy came negotiation. She moved from exhausting ten-hour shifts to a fair six-hour day, paid transparently. “Now I work for six hours until noon, and I am paid fairly for my time.”

Her transformation extended beyond herself. When SCF sought a venue for classes, Hawwa did something extraordinary: she donated a room from her modest two-room house. To complete the construction, she sold a calf raised through a sharing arrangement. “When SCF representatives shared the idea of opening a school for adult women, I sold one of the cattle I had and built the room as a donation. My goal was that I and other women could get an education.”

That room now fills with around thirty learners each day. Inside, women practice alphabets, calculate wages, and plan savings. Outside, neighbours speak of Hawwa as “Baji”, an elder who gave from what little she had so others could learn. Literacy has sharpened her home economics. She started small-batch pickle making, keeps neat accounts, and decides purchases with confidence. She reads health leaflets, checks medicine dates, and writes family reminders on a wall calendar. The change is visible in posture as much as in paper: a woman once hurried and uncertain now moves with measured assurance. Asked what literacy means, she answers simply: “Respect.” Respect for time hers and others”; respect for wages earned and counted; respect in community given and received. From being cheated of pay to being a donor of space for learning, Hawwa proves how education can turn vulnerability into leadership, and a single act of generosity into a doorway for dozens more.



## Case Study 4: Bilqees – Literacy as a Pathway to Fair Wages and Dignity



**“Now I can read and write, I can demand my rights, I can get fair pay for my work.”**

**Bilqees, 55, Shahmeer Ji Wasi**

For years in Shahmeer Ji Wasi, the weighing scale was an instrument of silence. Bilqees, fifty-five, stood quietly as contractors announced numbers she could not verify. Illiteracy restricted her to nods and trust, and too often the tally favored someone else.

That changed when she joined SCF’s adult literacy programme and discovered the power of numeracy. Learning to read digits, estimate kilograms, and cross-check payments gave her confidence. The first time she challenged a miscount, her voice trembled; the second time, it was steady. “We are well aware of negotiating about facilities as our right with the landlord; otherwise, we decline to work.” With peers, she organized weighing in full view and insisted on proper rest and water during work.

Literacy also opened a door to enterprise. Investing PKR 25,000 in pickle-making, Bilqees earned PKR 12,000 profit and saved half. She now prices inputs, tracks sales, and plans seasonal batches. Importantly, during the cotton off-season, she sells pickles, earning income that supports her family year-round. At home, she reads health messages and teaches her grandchildren to copy letters. “My granddaughters now copy my lessons at home. I never imagined I would inspire them,” she smiles.

Leadership followed naturally. Bilqees helped form the Ujala Women’s Trade Union, moving toward registration with the Provincial Labour Department. Meetings no longer intimidate her; she attends with notes, questions, and a clear sense of what fair work requires. Neighbours now call her when a form needs reading or a contractor needs reminding.

The transformation is not only economic, it is deeply personal. Literacy has replaced shame with clarity, fear with dialogue, and isolation with a collective voice. Bilqees still picks cotton, the fields remain, but the terms have shifted. She calculates, compares, and decides. She knows when to accept and when to walk away.

Asked what changed most, she replies with one word: “Counting.” Counting kilos, yes—but also counting herself in: her effort, her time, her worth. In that simple arithmetic, dignity adds up. Bilqees’s journey shows how literacy can transform lives turning silence into voice, dependence into independence, and invisible labour into recognized dignity.

## Case Study 5:

### Ishrat – From Learner to Community Leader

Ishrat, thirty, once kept her hopes small: finish the day's picking, cook, sleep, repeat. Education was for her children; she was too old, too busy, too tired. Then a neighbour coaxed her to the literacy centre. On the first day, she wrote a shaky line; on the tenth, she formed her name.

Reading labels and calculating costs brought immediate benefits fewer mistakes at the shop, clearer planning at home. She learned to read medicine expiry dates and teachers' notes from school. With friends she started a small chit fund, recording contributions and payouts in a simple ledger. When her first poultry venture failed, she did not hide it. "I took it as a lesson, not a defeat," she explains, noting what to change before trying again.

The shift that matters most is in her daughter's future. "Now I realize the importance of education, and I will make sure my daughter reaches higher studies." She discusses timetables, sets aside money for books, and meets teachers confidently. That parental advocacy ripples outward neighbours cite Ishrat when persuading reluctant fathers to keep girls in school.

In community meetings, Ishrat speaks with new steadiness. She helps others complete forms, explains wage slips, and encourages women to record start and finish times in the fields. The literacy centre asks her to greet new learners because she remembers precisely how fear feels on the first day and how quickly it fades with patience and praise.

Her ledger is modest dates, amounts, initials but it represents something profound: ownership of decisions. Ishrat now plans rather than reacts, and she invites others to do the same. "When we write, we see," she says, tapping the page. "We see our money, our mistakes, our goals."

From silent labourer to neighbour women call "organiser," Ishrat's journey shows that literacy is a foundation for leadership: a way to read the world, count what matters, and chart a path that daughters can follow further.

**"The happiest moment of my life is now once  
literate, I can write my name."**

Ishrat

## Section II – Women’s Leadership for Decent Work

### Case Study 6: Mumtaz – From Labourer to Union President



She once depended on others for even the smallest transactions, accepting whatever wage was handed over. Literacy changed that balance. Learning to read, write, and keep simple accounts gave her the confidence to question, compare, and plan.

She began with small trade selling pickle batches priced properly, listing inputs, and counting profits. That habit of record-keeping sharpened her eye for fairness at work.

When women complained of long hours without water or shade, Mumtaz helped gather testimonies, record timings, and weigh cotton accurately. Her calm precision impressed her peers, who soon elected her president of the Ujala Women’s Trade Union. “Now we are aware and ready to negotiate with the landlord in the next cotton season,” she says.

As president, Mumtaz pushes for government-fixed wages, rest breaks in shade, safe drinking water, and transparent weighing of cotton. She also challenges old barriers that discouraged women from studying or speaking in public. “Unlike the past, now there isn’t as much strictness for women to study,” she notes, proud to see mothers arriving at literacy centres with toddlers in tow.

Her leadership style is steady and practical. She trains emerging leaders to keep work logs, read pay slips, and present issues clearly to growers. New members are paired with “reading buddies” to review forms and build confidence together. Mumtaz brings written evidence to every discussion, ensuring demands are not just emotional appeals but grounded in facts.

This change is visible in negotiations. Landlords who once dismissed women now face a disciplined team with notes, lists, and agreed positions. When talks stall, Mumtaz steadies the group, reminding them that unity multiplies their voice. She still works in the fields, hands stained with cotton dust, but now carries a folder filled with minutes and targets. Mumtaz’s journey from worker to president shows how literacy fuels leadership. With words and numbers in her hands, she has become not only an earner but a decision-maker, shaping conditions so that hundreds of women can work with dignity and demand their rights with confidence.

**“Before education I had no command in recognizing currency notes.”**

Mumtaz, 40, Shahmeer Ji Wasee



## **Case Study 7: Sakeena – Safer Work, Fair Wages, and Rights Awareness**

Sakeena, forty, from Darya Khan Talpur, remembers the sting of pesticides on bare skin and the dull headache of afternoon heat. For years she worked without gloves or water breaks, assuming discomfort was the cost of survival. She was paid little, often rushed at weighing, and never had a say in her conditions.

Everything began to shift when she joined SCF’s literacy classes and labour rights sessions. Through learning, she discovered the link between health and safe work practices. “Before, we worked with bare hands in pesticides. Now we know this harms our health,” she explains. Sakeena started wearing gloves and socks, encouraged her co-workers to take shade breaks, and pressed for water during picking hours. Women collectively agreed they would not continue work in the fields without drinking water and short pauses to recover from heat.

Negotiation extended to wages and food. Together with fellow workers, Sakeena engaged with contractors and insisted on a raise. The group secured a wage increase from Rs. 500 to Rs. 800 per day a 60% improvement that directly supported food and household needs. During peak harvest, they also demanded cooked meals or food allowances on long days in the fields. These wins showed women that organizing and speaking together could deliver tangible results.

Math skills gave Sakeena new confidence beyond the fields. She began calculating embroidery costs—thread, time, and transport so middlemen could no longer dictate unfair rates. “Now since I am aware of market rates, I charge higher and fair prices,” she says, proudly noting that her income steadied and she can now set aside savings for her children’s schooling.

Her role in community advocacy groups has grown too. She helps others understand mobile payment messages, insists on fair weighing of cotton, and teaches safety practices. At home, she checks medicine labels and stores pesticides away from food areas. At work, she models protective gear and refuses unsafe tasks, telling younger women: “We can work hard and also work safely.” Sakeena’s story reflects a journey from silent endurance to active negotiation for wages, water, food, and safety. It is a story of hands once unprotected now gloved, of pay once dictated now bargained, and of a woman once voiceless now guiding others toward dignity and fair work.

## Case Study 8: Seeds of Change Zubaida Solangi's Journey to Leadership

In Meenho Machi village, 35-year-old Zubaida Solangi, mother of five, spent much of her life bent over in cotton fields. The sun was relentless, wages were unfair, and the work was unsafe. Clean water and protective gear were unheard of. For years, she endured without complaint, lacking a platform to speak out.

That changed when she joined the trade unions formed by the Sindh Community Foundation (SCF) and became a founding member of the Sujagi Trade Union. For the first time, women cotton pickers could gather, share grievances, and organize collectively.

Through leadership training, Zubaida learned about her rights under the Sindh Industrial Relations Act 2013. She began conducting awareness meetings, encouraging women to demand fair pay and better conditions. Soon, she was mentoring others and leading negotiations with growers. With her persistence, the union gained registration through the Labour Department, giving women a recognized voice.

Her activism grew bolder. At the Women Workers' Assembly, Zubaida helped draft a Charter of Demands that included fair wages, social protection, safe working conditions, and climate justice measures. She highlighted the dangers of extreme heat and the urgent need for shaded rest areas and protective gear.

“We work under the burning sun without water or safety. All we ask for is fairness, shade, and dignity,” Zubaida told fellow workers, her voice echoing the demands of many. Determined to act, she convinced a local landowner to provide the installation of an eco-shade structure in the fields. With SCF's support, the shaded area was built, offering women immediate relief from the punishing sun. It was a small but powerful symbol of progress. Her leadership reached city platforms too. At press conferences in Hyderabad and Karachi, she spoke about the realities of women cotton pickers and demanded reforms to ensure dignity at work.

Today, the Sujagi Trade Union has over 35 members, a growing force for fair work. Zubaida's story shows that leadership is not inherited it is created through courage, learning, and action. Her journey proves that when women unite, even the smallest steps like demanding shade can spark big change.



**“We work under the burning sun without water or safety. All we ask for is fairness, shade, and dignity,”**

Zubaida

## Case Study 9:

### Bakh Union Women Lead Climate Literacy in Yameen Aphan Village

In Yameen Aphan, District Matiari, women cotton pickers were used to working long hours under extreme heat, often suffering headaches, faintness, and pesticide exposure. For many, these hardships felt inevitable. That began to change when Seeta and Sadori, leaders of the Bakh Women Cotton Workers Trade Union (“Bakh” means Dawn in Sindhi), attended SCF’s climate-health training.

The training gave them new awareness of how climate change was shaping their daily lives. They realized that heat stress, water shortages, and unsafe spraying practices were part of a wider crisis, not just personal misfortune. Motivated to act, Seeta and Sadori returned home and shared the knowledge with 30 fellow members of their trade union. Together, they adopted simple but effective practices: drinking water more regularly, resting in shade, and avoiding pesticide spraying during peak heat.

To make shade real, the women launched a Neem planting drive. “Planting trees is like planting protection for our children,” one mother said as saplings took root in courtyards. The union tracked survival rates, watered shared trees, and paired planting with conversations about safe cooking, clean water storage, and heatwave planning. As Seeta reflected: “Knowledge is not useful if you keep it only for yourself. I feel proud when women say they changed habits because of what we shared.” The union’s role quickly evolved from workers demanding fairness to facilitators of resilience. Field conversations now include heat alerts, pesticide schedules, and rest norms alongside wages.

More than sixty women have adopted these practices. Illness days declined, while productivity and morale improved. Building on this momentum, the union also began dialogues with growers about shaded rest points and safe water in fields linking climate adaptation directly to decent work. For Seeta, Sadori, and their members, climate literacy is not an abstract subject. It is a daily safety tool, a collective right, and a pathway to dignity at work. Their leadership shows how women-led unions can turn training into transformation, caring for both the earth and themselves, while planting the seeds of a sustainable future.



“I never thought the rising heat and water shortages were part of a bigger crisis. Now I see it affects our health, our work, and our children’s future,”

Seeta

## Case Study 10:

### Collective Bargaining for Fair Wages – Amna, Noor Khan Vighio

In Noor Khan Vighio village, District Matiari, women cotton pickers had long worked for just Rs. 500 per day. They endured long hours in the fields, heat, and pesticide exposure without ever questioning their pay. Few knew that the government had set a legal minimum wage pegged at Rs. 37,000 per month. For Amna, like many others, survival meant accepting whatever was offered.

That reality shifted in early 2025, when Sindh Community Foundation (SCF) held training sessions on minimum wage laws and collective bargaining. For the first time, Amna and her peers discovered that their earnings were not just unfair but also below the law. “We did not even know a minimum wage law existed. Now we know,” Amna explained. Knowledge quickly turned into determination.

Encouraged by SCF’s guidance, Amna and thirty other women formed a trade union in the village. They practiced negotiation skills, agreed on a common strategy, and prepared to face the growers together before the cotton season opened. When June 2025 arrived, the growers repeated their standard offer of Rs. 500 per day. This time, the women stood firm. Calmly but resolutely, they refused to begin picking until wages were raised. “When we stood together and said we would not pick cotton for less than Rs. 800, they had no choice but to listen,” Amna recalled.

The standoff was not easy. Growers resisted and threatened delays, but the women did not break ranks. Their unity paid off: wages were increased from Rs. 500 to Rs. 800 per day. The Rs. 300 raise meant each worker earned nearly Rs. 15,000 more over the four-month picking season. For families on the edge of poverty, the change was life-altering. “My fellow workers were happy to receive the increased wage. For us, it meant food on the table, school fees paid, and hope for the future,” Amna said with pride.

The victory did not stop there. The union registered with the Provincial Labour Department under the Jideo Jhadak (“struggle”) network, gaining legal status and stronger bargaining power. Members began recording hours, tracking cotton weighings, and preparing proposals linking fair wages with safe conditions and climate-aware scheduling.

Amna sees the achievement as the start, not the end. “We will keep struggling until we get the full minimum wage,” she affirms. Already, women in neighbouring villages are discussing similar strategies, inspired by Noor Khan Vighyo’s success. The story of Amna and her fellow workers shows that when women unite around knowledge and solidarity, they can change not only their wages but also the very norms that shape dignity and justice in the cotton fields of Sindh.





## 350 Women Trained in Basic Literacy

Skills in reading, writing and math → improved wage calculation, confidence and decisionmaking.



## 1350 Women Strengthened in Climate Justice & Protection

Mobilized from 20 villages (10 new+ 10 old) in Southern Sindh → enhanced awareness, resilience and safeguards against vulnerabilities.



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