



# Where Literacy Change the Lives

Cases of Impact  
Literacy for the Rights Project

**Sindh Community Foundation**

## Authors

Javed Hussain  
Sameer Mandhro

## Photographer

Irfan Memon  
Javed Hussain  
Zubaida Turk

## Graphic Designer

Tamour Ali Khan

## Publishing Year

2024

Copyright © Sindh Community  
Foundation 2024



[www.scfnngo.org](http://www.scfnngo.org)



0222-107676



[sindhfoundation@yahoo.com](mailto:sindhfoundation@yahoo.com)



[/sindhcommunityfoundation](https://www.facebook.com/sindhcommunityfoundation)

## Sindh Community Foundation

### Head Office Hyderabad

Information and Resource Development  
Center & Youth Resource Center H # A12  
First Floor Happy Homes Chowk  
Qasimabad Hyderabad, Sindh, Pakistan

### Matiari Office

Near Sonerhi Bank Tharoo Shah Road,  
Matiari

### Mirpurkhas Office

Opposite Comprehensive High School  
Near ICE Factory Kareem Town, Mirpurkhas

### Thatta Office

House No 625 Makli Cooperative  
Hashimabad Housing society Phase 3  
Makli, Thatta

### Karachi Office

House No N-98/N99, Block 13 Gulistan e  
Johar, Karachi

## From the Chair & Executive Director

More than a million women cotton workers in Sindh are engaged in women's cotton 90% of women cotton workers are illiterate so they are unable to calculate their wages often their wages are not properly given. Addressing this issue SCF started to work to promote literacy among women cotton workers for the protection of their rights in 10 villages of the Matiari district of Sindh one of the cotton producing districts in the province.

Sindh Community Foundation (SCF) has set up twenty-five literacy centers for women cotton pickers in the Matiari district of Sindh in order to improve basic literacy among the 884 rural women. The initiative has been named "Suhaee" a Sindhi word which means "light". These literacy centers have been established in the 25 villages of district Matiari. Out of 884 women cotton workers enrolled in the first literacy batch, 359 have been part of the literacy program, and the rest are getting basic literacy classes. Each center has an enrollment of 30 to 35 women cotton workers. The six-month informal literacy package approved by the Sindh government is being applied will enhance their literacy level and social consciousness to apply in daily lives. The women expressed their enjoyment and satisfaction with the sessions stating that the skills they acquired are highly relevant and are applicable in their daily lives.

For this SCF has engaged local female literacy facilitators to run literacy classes. They delivered two hours daily classes in three subjects Mathematics, Sindhi, and English. The attendance rate throughout the training remained consistently high at 90%.

The project is leaving a positive impact on the lives of women cotton workers and creating a level of confidence and knowledge so they would be able to calculate the wages properly and apply the learning of literacy in their daily lives. The project was supported by Feed the Minds UK and recently partnered by AVPN under its Asia Gender Equality Fund to scaleup the literacy model in more 30 villages.

These stories are the reflection of the work we carried out to create a real impact in the lives of the women cotton workers. This is the small step we have taken and still, there is a long way to walk. We need more support in order to sustain the impact and to reach out to more women cotton workers to be equipped with basic literacy and numeric skills. Women experience an increased 50% income from cotton picking because of increased literacy, numeracy, and wage negotiation skills. This initiative contributed towards the decent work and socio-economic empowerment of women cotton workers.



**Shahnaz Shedi**  
Chairperson - SCF



**Javed Hussain**  
Executive Director - SCF

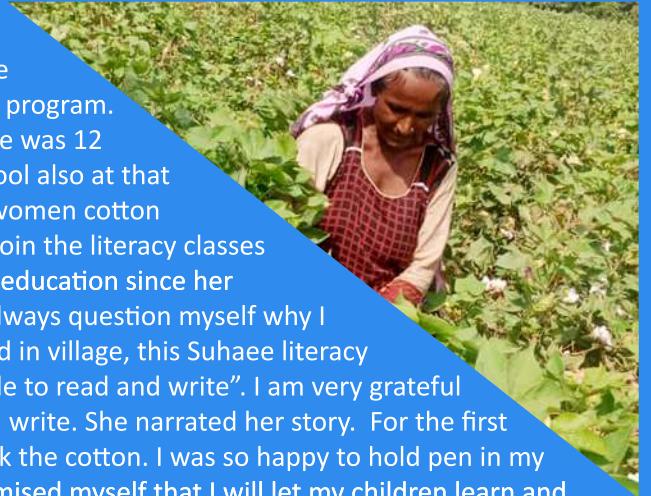
**“350 Women cotton workers experience increased 50% incomes from cotton picking because of increased literacy, numeracy, and wage negotiation skills imparted by SCF.”**

# SCF Decent Work & Climate Adaptation Model



## Literacy for Economic Empowerment

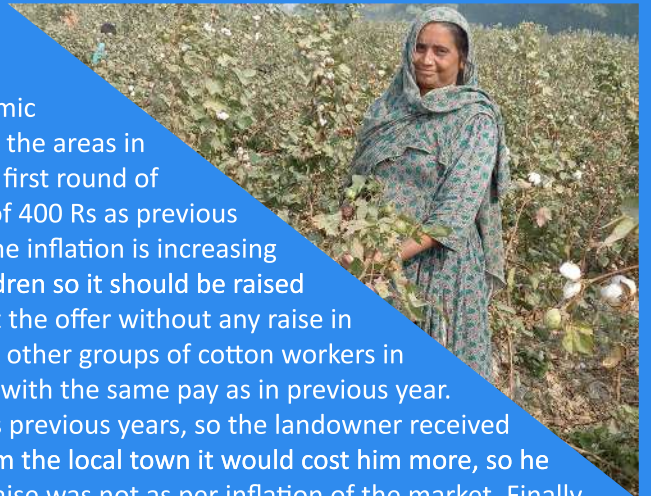
Zaibun Nisa is 25 years old woman cotton worker residing in village Meho Machi, one of the targeted villages for the literacy for rights program. She has 2 kids, and she has been working as cotton picker since she was 12 years old. Her parents were poor so could not send her to the school also at that time there was not any primary schools in her village. She joined women cotton workers group in village. She said that she desperately wanted to join the literacy classes as she as always been wanting to go to schools and have thirst for education since her childhood.” While seeing children going to school in my village, I always question myself why I could not go to school. As the adult learners program never started in village, this Suhaee literacy center has fulfilled dream of many women cotton pickers to be able to read and write”. I am very grateful to the center that finally I have an opportunity to start to read and write. She narrated her story. For the first time, I hold a pen in my hand while I always used my fingers to pick the cotton. I was so happy to hold pen in my fingers and when I returned on the first day from the center, I promised myself that I will let my children learn and encourage them to complete their higher education.” Shahida is very happy with the learning methods and environment of the literacy center. She further states that we didn't know if the exact amount is written in the record book of landowners or not and always, we received less wage due to record keeping cheating in calculation of wages. It was difficult for us to remember about the number of days we worked and also, we could not calculate our wage properly. But now we would not be cheated as we will be able to keep the record ourselves and calculate that amount that we should be receiving. We will be able to compare our and landowners record keeping and calculate accordingly”. She believes that power of literacy gives confidence and knowledge to all.



*Note: Consent has been taken verbally.*

## Collective Bargaining for Decent Working Conditions

Parti is a woman leader of the Seeta Labour Union in village Tarah. Parti belongs to the religious minority with very poor socio-economic background. She has recently negotiated well with the growers of the areas in July, she was able to fix the wage for the cotton picking. July is the first round of cotton harvesting season. “The landowner was given same wage of 400 Rs as previous year, while when they offered for that wage, we negotiated that the inflation is increasing and with the wage offering we cannot feed ourselves and our children so it should be raised this year”. She shared that they refused for the first time to accept the offer without any raise in their wage. For few days, the landowner waited for response from other groups of cotton workers in village and surrounding. But none of the groups accepted to work with the same pay as in previous year. We sensitized all our members not to work with the same wage as previous years, so the landowner received negative response from all the groups. If he had to hire labour from the local town it would cost him more, so he offered 450Rs, but we still did not accept that wage because the raise was not as per inflation of the market. Finally, when he realized that all workers have same demand for increment in the wage, he offered Rs 500 this year”. She narrated. “This is achievement of unity of all 3 groups in our areas. We learnt in the awareness workshops held by SCF that now wage should be in line with the inflation and prices of market”. She mentioned that SCF's efforts open their eyes and helped them to raise voice and negotiate for increment in their wage. Unfortunately, after receiving one month increased salary, the devastating flood in August 2022 damaged the crops destroying our source of livelihood and making us deprived of daily requirement of bread”. She also shared that she contacted different focal persons for the relief and were able to receive some ration for 30 women cotton workers who were badly affected by floods. She is an example of confidence, leadership and rights awareness among women cotton workers with the project.



*Note: Consent has been taken verbally.*

## From cotton fields to classrooms

Fifteen years ago, Ghulam Zuhra entered into matrimony without the opportunity for an early education. Like the other women in Jamal Dahri Goth, a village nestled a mere 2 kilometers from the National Highway, her life unfolded in the arduous realm of agriculture as a cotton picker—a daily wage laborer.

The revelation of a literacy center opening in her village reached Zuhra one fine day, offering the prospect of learning to read, write, and grasp basic mathematics. Initially, the idea didn't immediately capture her attention. "Can someone like me be enrolled in a school or center?" she pondered skeptically. However, as she puts it, it turned out to be a dream come true. Undeterred by the challenges posed by being a mother of four children and a financially constrained cotton picker, Zuhra became part of the inaugural cohort of around 30 women enrolled in the literacy center, an initiative facilitated by the Sindh Community Foundation. For three hours each day, they gathered under the guidance of Miss Rihana, the village's sole woman holding an Intermediate certificate.

To Zuhra and her peers, the youthful Rihana became a beacon of hope, affectionately referred to as "Baji," signifying sisterhood. With newfound confidence, Zuhra showcased her burgeoning writing and counting skills, meticulously inscribing numbers in her mother tongue—hik, ba...teh [one, two, three...]. Her smile radiated a sense of accomplishment as she proudly declared, "I can count and know how to keep my accounts straight. No one can cheat me—even in the market," raising her eyebrows with a chuckle. In the span of a three-month course, Ghulam Zuhra and her comrades experienced a transformative journey, gaining not just literacy but a renewed sense of life. Suhni, a fellow learner alongside Zuhra, chimed in, expressing gratitude to their husbands for the encouragement that paved the way for their newfound empowerment at the literacy center.

*Note: Consent has been taken verbally.*

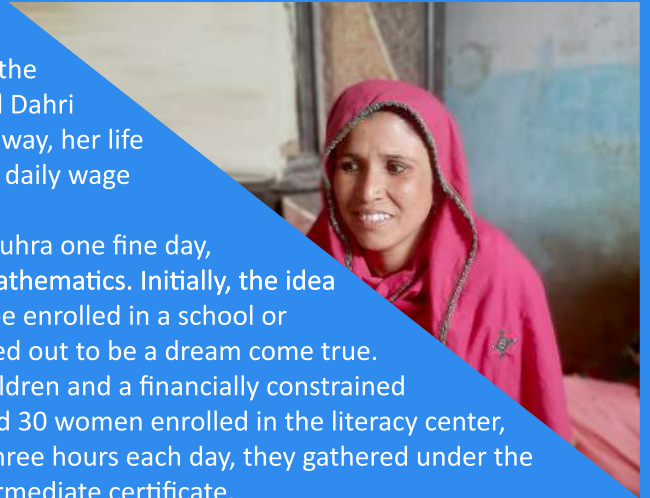
## Empowered Voices: Women cotton pickers forge a collective path for fair wages, dignity

The resolve echoes through the voices of the cotton picker women in Matiari: they are willing to work, but their commitment hinges on fair compensation for their labor. Rozina, a staunch advocate for the rights of these women, emphasizes the importance of standing up for due wages, asserting that compromise is not an option. Under the blistering sun at the season's onset, she underscores that insufficient wages not only impact their economic well-being but also take a toll on their physical and mental health.

In the agricultural heartland of Sindh province, Matiari stands as a major contributor to the country's cotton production, with an estimated 95 percent of cotton pickers being women. Historically, a lack of awareness left these women vulnerable to exploitation as agriculturalists took advantage of their ignorance about their rights. Rozina emphasizes a crucial shift in strategy, noting that their transition from individual to collective work has proven effective.

Suhni, a co-worker of Rozina, narrates the genesis of this collective movement. Women in the community initiated meetings and dialogue to foster a shared understanding of their rights and to advocate for better wages. The rationale behind their demand for fair compensation is rooted in the proximity of their residences to the fields, eliminating the need for the landlords to incur additional expenses for external labor.

Recently, these women have taken the bold step of engaging directly with landlords, articulating the importance of receiving just compensation for their labor and advocating for improved working conditions during the scorching days of the season. The unity among laborers is seen as a potent tool, allowing them to collectively make informed decisions. However, Sohni, a 36-year-old cotton picker, reflects on the challenges that persist, particularly the need to comprehend the underlying obstacles.



The arduous conditions, compounded by nearly five hours under the burning sun, exacerbate the challenges faced by women like Sohni. Lamenting her past exploitation due to a lack of education, she underscores the imperative for these women to grasp their rights and transcend the barriers that hinder their collective progress. In Matiari, a nascent movement is gaining momentum as these resilient women courageously demand not just fair wages but also a dignified and equitable working environment.

*Note: Consent has been taken verbally.*

## Breaking chains: Empowered women cotton pickers challenge traditions, oust exploitative intermediaries

In the heart of a traditionally rural and predominantly male-dominated society, challenging the authority of a man, particularly a landlord, is deemed a daunting endeavor. It requires exceptional fortitude to confront established hierarchies and assert one's rights. In this context, 35 female daily wage laborers from Meho Machhi village, situated approximately 12 kilometers from Matiari city, took a bold step in 2022 by forming their organization, aptly named "Sujagi," meaning awareness.

Zubeda, the stalwart leader of these women cotton pickers, recounted the genesis of their collective journey. The initial challenge was to break free from the customary practice of interacting with the 'Jamadar,' the intermediary who dictated decisions on behalf of the landlord. Zubeda emphasized that this middleman, driven by his own interests, often failed to represent the concerns of the laborers to the landlords.

Taking a stand, the women made the audacious decision to cease communication with the Jamadar and demanded direct engagement with the landlord. Zubeda reflected on the courage it took to confront the authority face to face. The pivotal turning point came when the local landlord, recognizing the value of women laborers, acquiesced to their request and participated in the initial meetings, marking a significant success for Sujagi.

During these meetings, the women advocated for direct communication with the landlord, a departure from the entrenched practice of intermediaries. The landlord, open to this novel idea, agreed to engage directly with the women, signaling a positive shift in dynamics.

The women contended that the absence of the Jamadar, whom they deemed an exploiter, led to a favorable change in their overall situation. Zubeda highlighted the trust deficit that existed, alleging that the Jamadar not only took away their rightful share but also displayed indecent behavior. Eliminating his involvement became crucial for securing proper wages and instilling a sense of contentment among the women.

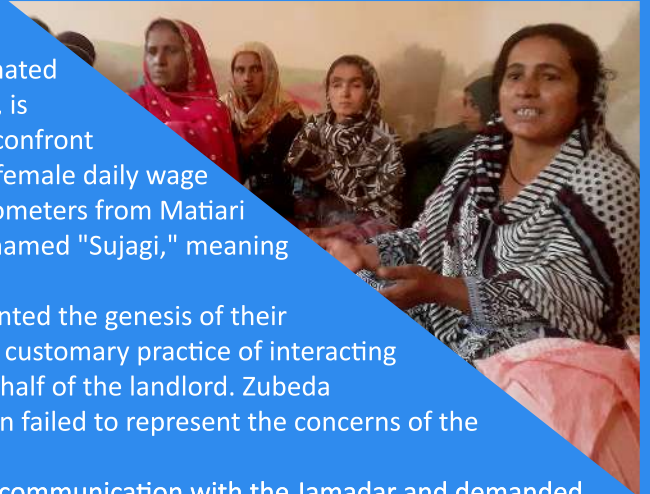
With satisfaction evident in Zubeda's words, she declared that the Jamadar's role had come to an end in their area, expressing hope that other women would be inspired to follow suit. She passionately advocated for the prohibition of exploitative roles, emphasizing the transformative power of unity and collective action in reclaiming the rights of marginalized laborers.

*Note: Consent has been taken verbally.*

## Suffering in Silence: Inadequate safety, grueling hours, and a cry for health support

Amidst the relentless demands of backbreaking labor, scant provisions, and the punishing embrace of scorching heat, Sakina, toiling in the unforgiving cotton fields, succumbed to exhaustion and collapsed. Swiftly rallied by her comrades, she was revived with whatever makeshift life support was at hand. Reflecting on the incident, Sakina attributed it to the searing heat, coupled with a gnawing hunger and thirst that had taken its toll on her.

In her forties, Sakina appears as an unassuming figure, emblematic of the average women in her locality who, amidst



their arduous routines, often neglect their health. Rising with the dawn, rural women like Sakina embark on a day that encompasses not only the demands of the fields but also the responsibilities of preparing meals, tending to children, and managing household chores.

Sakina, gazing at her fellow laborers, lamented the routine departure from home without a proper lunch, revealing that while they often shared what little food they had, it proved insufficient to sustain them. For the four-month cotton season, a grueling endeavor, these women earn a meager PKR 40,000 (USD 150), with the bulk of their earnings earmarked for household expenses or savings.

Working without safety kits, these women confront a myriad of challenges, from snake bites to dehydration, often relegating their own well-being to the background. Sakina, suppressing her emotions, emphasized, "Health is not our priority; we work for our families," casting a reassuring gaze at her daughter. Cotton picker women contend with a lack of safety gear, including hand gloves and shoes, leaving them vulnerable to various hazards. Compounding their struggles, there is no health insurance to mitigate the risks they face in the agricultural field. Sakina elucidated the demanding routine – a relentless 10-hour workday from 7 am to 5 pm, sans any respite or holidays.

Zubeda, echoing the sentiments of her peers, advocated for governmental intervention, urging the issuance of health cards for working women. "Health is our major issue, and we cannot afford to allocate our meager earnings towards it," she asserted. In their collective plea for support, these resilient women sought recognition of their plight and measures to safeguard their well-being in the face of challenging circumstances.

*Note: Consent has been taken verbally.*

## **Nurturing Livelihoods: Matiari's rural women, anchored by cotton season, seek governmental support for financial resilience**

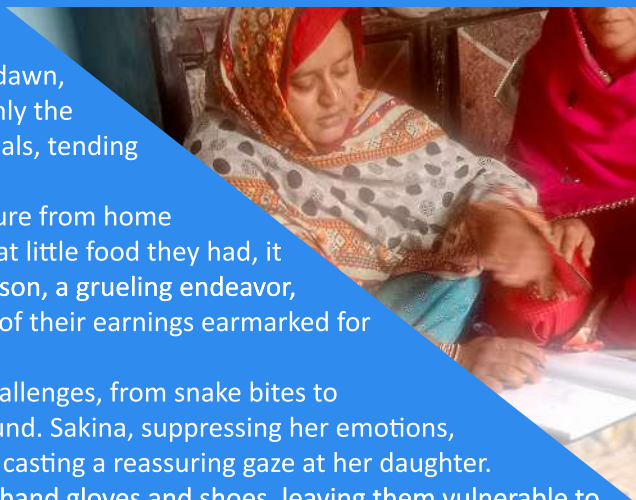
In the heartland of Matiari district in the Sindh province, the cotton season stands as the bedrock of sustenance for rural women, offering a lifeline through which they can earn and set aside funds for unforeseen challenges. This cash crop, considered pivotal, becomes a source of financial empowerment for these women, allowing them to navigate the unpredictable tides of life.

During the off-season, when the cotton fields lay dormant, these resilient women turn to alternative avenues for livelihood. Some engage in gathering chillies, while others channel their efforts into home-based activities, crafting various handmade items. Sher Bano, a seasoned laborer, emphasized the inherent struggle, acknowledging that venturing into the fields is a skill ingrained in their lives. She revealed that their earnings during such periods barely reach PKR 100, underscoring the financial constraints they face.

Despite a few women in the village mastering embroidery, it proved insufficient in providing robust support. Sher Bano, reflecting on the limited opportunities in their village, expressed a willingness to work hard but lamented the scarcity of options. The cyclical nature of rural life, marked by dependence on the cotton season, compels these women to seek supplementary means of subsistence during the off-season.

For the women of Matiari, idleness is not an option. They are the linchpin of their families, shouldering diverse responsibilities. Sher Bano encapsulated the essence of rural existence, asserting, "We cannot totally rely on our men." Another elder concurred, highlighting the pervasive ethos that work is intrinsic to their identity. However, she smiled, acknowledging their resilience and acceptance of their destined role as laborers.

In the face of this challenging reality, the call emerged for governmental support. The plea was for inclusion in a network that could offer financial assistance during periods of unemployment, recognizing the pivotal role these women play in sustaining their communities.



*Note: Consent has been taken verbally.*

## Literacy for lifelong learning ambitions

In the hamlets of Jamal Dahri Goth and Mevo Machhi Goth, a transformative wind of change has swept through the lives of eager learners who, having tasted a three-month education program, now yearn for more. Reflecting on the initial foray into teaching, Rihana, a 25-year-old tutor, expressed enthusiasm, noting the palpable delight in her students as they eagerly anticipate further educational endeavors.

Sohni, reminiscing about her own childhood and education in the region, contrasted the irregularity of village school instructors with the dedicated commitment of educators like Rihana. "I wish he could be like Rihana and could teach us regularly," she mused. Sharing a personal triumph, Sohni narrated her journey from being "deaf and dumb" to gaining confidence and shedding the label of illiteracy through the empowering three-month teaching course.

Farzana emphasized the untapped potential of these women, contending that formal education could equip them to make significant contributions to their families. Observing the fervor for learning and the desire to achieve more, she underscored the value of such aspirations. Sohni echoed this sentiment, expressing a desire for broader education opportunities. She envisioned the transformative impact of technical courses in her village, positing that such skills could not only alter individual destinies but also contribute to the nation's progress.

In the spirit of collective progress, Rihana revealed that their plea for additional courses had been forwarded to the Sindh Community Foundation. Advocating for advanced and technical courses, she asserted that rural women possess the innate capability to master these skills, thereby reshaping their lives. Shehzadi, echoing this sentiment, spoke of her husband's encouragement for her continued education. While enrollment in traditional schools might be challenging, she fervently urged the continuation of accessible centers, emphasizing the need for sustained educational opportunities beyond short-term courses.

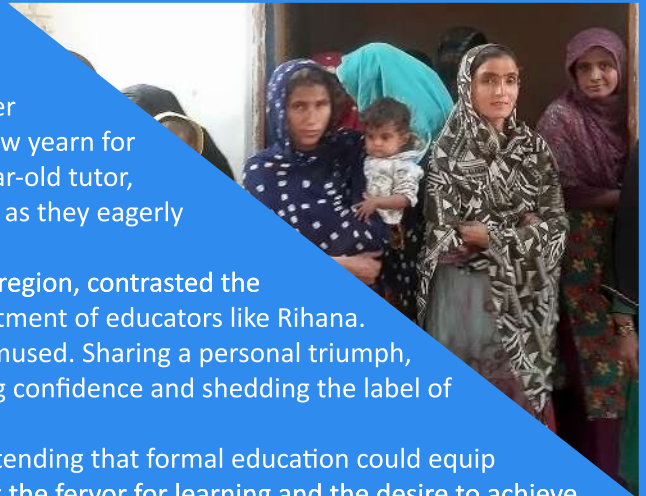
*Note: Consent has been taken verbally.*

## Lightning the Lives

Rani, a 37-year-old woman, lives in Alam Khasekheli, one of the villages that the Matiari district project has set as a target. She has been working as a cotton picker since she was a young child. Rani's parents brought her along to pick cotton when she was nine years old during the sweltering summer. She had to go with them even though she was only a child, and this went on for almost 25 years. Rani reflects on her past and recalls how, although her brother had the opportunity to go to school, she was not permitted to go with him because, at the time, sending girls to school was frowned upon. She continues by recounting her experiences: "We dealt with severe weather and received meager pay. I can't recall how much money I earned or how much cotton I picked. Most of the time, the middleman's calculations were lower than the values we actually chose and recorded in a book. We were not aware of what they were recording.

Rani's joy, however, knew no bounds when the SCF team visited their village to lead a session on labour rights and announced the opening of a center. She eagerly signed up to be one of the first students. She learned the fundamentals of reading and writing over the course of six months, and even developed the ability to calculate wages. She used her newly acquired knowledge in her day-to-day activities with success. "Now, I can effectively manage the household grocery shopping and maintain numerical records on my own," says Rani with pride.

*Note: Consent has been taken verbally.*



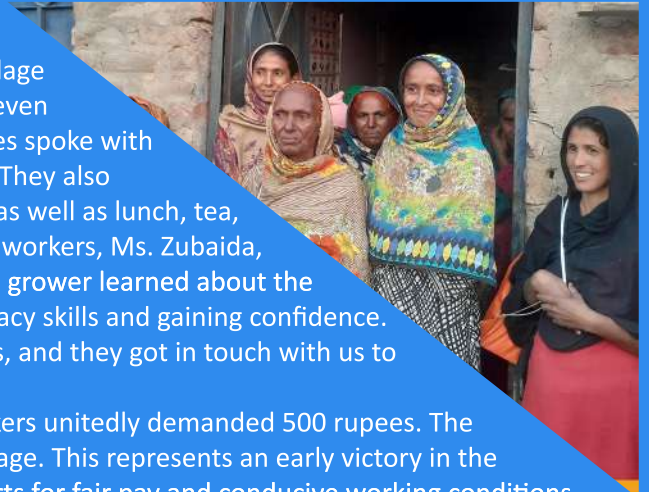
## A Better Occupational Health and Safety

Negotiations between the trade union founded in Meho Machi village and the cotton grower have made significant progress. This time, even before the cotton harvest season started, the union representatives spoke with the farmers and demanded a pay increase of at least 500 Rupees. They also argued for offering the picker's shelter during the picking process as well as lunch, tea, and other refreshments. The head of the union for women cotton workers, Ms. Zubaida, explains what led to this encouraging development: "Our previous grower learned about the literacy center, where women cotton workers were gaining numeracy skills and gaining confidence. This sparked discussions at the regional level with decision-makers, and they got in touch with us to start working on the summer wage."

The growers initially proposed a wage of 400 rupees, but the workers unitedly demanded 500 rupees. The growers ultimately consented to the requested rate as the daily wage. This represents an early victory in the women cotton workers' collective bargaining and negotiation efforts for fair pay and conducive working conditions. Their confidence has increased, and they are more aware of their rights, fair working conditions, and the minimum wage thanks in large part to the literacy classes. Before, they lacked this information and felt less confident in their work.

Zubaida further elaborates about the advancements made, noting that they have built a good working relationship with the district administration and pushed for the inclusion of social welfare programs. In order to ensure their protection and welfare, they have also interacted with local government candidates in their area and asked for their platform.

*Note: Consent has been taken verbally.*





We are thankful for the generous support of FTM & AVPN for this intervention

Literacy rate of Pakistan is 62.3%



52%

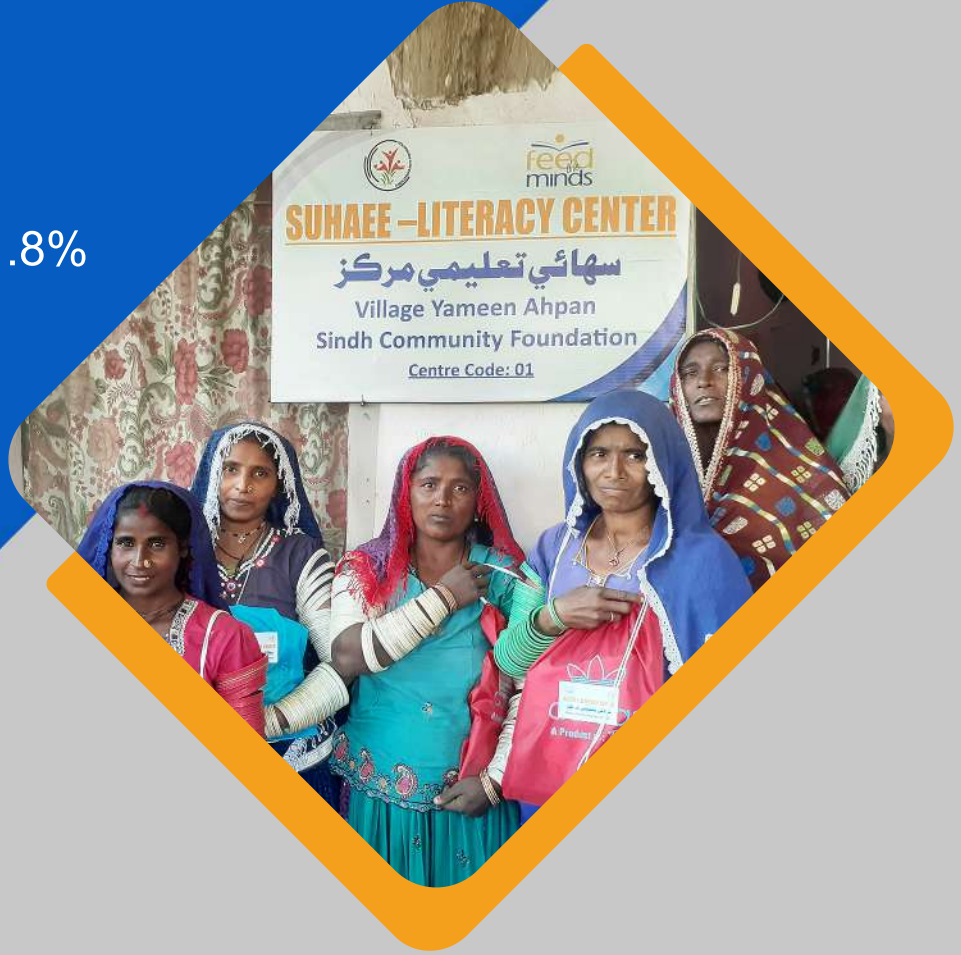
(% of illiterate women in PAKISTAN)

Literacy rate in Sindh is 61.8%



49%

(% of illiterate women in SINDH)



## CONTACT WITH US



0222-107676



sindhfoundation@yahoo.com



www.scfngo.org