

MONEY IN HER HANDS

AFGHANISTAN

Sabza Gul from Parwan district in Afghanistan became a farmer at 48 years old. In her community, horticulture production typically was a male domain and women participated by helping their husbands on the family farm. For many years, Sabza was forbidden to leave her home because she was bound by the traditional practice of “purdah”. She did not visit her neighbors or go to the local market. She and her three children frequently did not have enough food and although her husband was a farmer, he used traditional farming practices that did not produce high yields. In 2007, Sabza was encouraged by a local organization to participate in training run by Mennonite Economic Development Associates (MEDA) for women in the farming community. The focus was on teaching women how to grow vegetables in kitchen gardens within family compounds for home consumption and sale. Sabza quickly learned about the importance of cultivating in rows, irrigation, composting and how to harvest without spoilage. With the support of her husband, she trained to be a Lead Farmer and began to teach and guide other women in her community. Sabza received information about the importance of crop diversification and was connected with a microfinance institution for credit. She and the women in her village were linked with suppliers and markets for their vegetables. Through her interactions with agricultural extension workers and the women in her community, she learned to share her successes and challenges, acquired business management skills, and became literate. Now she is running multiple businesses (sale for vegetables and fruit products, poultry, cows, and sheep) and owns a donkey. Her success was financed from the profits of jam, pickles, and dried fruits sales and reinvested in her business and her family.

PAKISTAN

Saleem Bukari is a social entrepreneur. But this wasn’t always the case. She lived in an isolated and very conservative village with her husband and five daughters. For years she made a bit of income by embroidering fabric that her husband sold in the local market. In 2004, Saleem joined a training course to become a MEDA Sales Agent, bringing the embroidery of her neighbours to the market. This required her to leave her home and travel to Karachi, the nearest large city market, offering higher value for these products. Initially her husband insisted on accompanying her. As he became familiar with the training in which Saleem was participating, he became more supportive. Now, years later, with her business doing well, she travels regularly to Karachi on her own to deliver products to her regular customers. Not only has she built her own business, she has supported other women as they started up their own enterprises, helping one women set up an input supply shop in the village and assisting another in establishing a design tracing service. In her own home, her daughter has opened a school providing basic education to village children, an opportunity to which Saleem never had access.

ANALYSIS

Sabza and Saleem are like thousands of women in Afghanistan and Pakistan who have demonstrated that increased income has allowed them to make significant advances not only economically but socially, toward a future that they can shape. With increased earnings, they have gained greater control of their income, increased participation in key family decisions, and expanded participation in their communities. With their income they have acquired social capital in their families and communities and they have built an asset base that has enabled



them to save labor and increase their protection against economic shocks. Their children have been able to attend school more consistently and for more years. And the women describe how their status in their homes and communities has changed. They have gone from being isolated to being role models and leaders in their communities. Most importantly, they have found new confidence in their own abilities and skills.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Share examples from your personal or work experience where you have seen economic empowerment result in social or political gains for women. In your opinion, what was the key factor that led to this transformative change?
- From these readings and our previous sessions, list three tips that you would give a colleague who is designing a value chain project or market systems development program to ensure that women participate, benefit, and have equal opportunity to share, learn, and grow.