

## Struggling for Liberation

Hindu families are scattered in the cholistan desert South Punjab. Most of their men, women and children work on land lords' agricultural farms and at brick kilns from dawn to dusk. Their children are involved in child labor and their women work in the land lords' homes for cleaning, collect animal dung and do all types of menial jobs. As their children grow up the boys are sent to farms to help their fathers and the young girls and women work as crop weaver, crop harvesting, weeding, and as land lords' domestic workers. These women also collect dung and provide fodder for land lords' animals, work in the paddy fields, go out for cotton picking, wheat harvesting, weeding crops and perform bounded labor at the brick kilns. They are slaves to the land lords and remain constantly under heavy debts. One of the adult education trainees shared her story by saying:

My name is Periti Mai from a poor Hindu family. I am 55 years old never went to school due to poverty, ignorance of my parents and had no schooling facility in my area. I have worked throughout my life as a slave with the land lord and I saw no way out for liberation from this constant slavery which is imposed on us through the perpetuated trap of debt. In my early age I never thought about what it means to be educated and what it means to be liberated from the slavery but as the social and electronic media came up my tiny world expanded into the wider developed world. I began reflecting how to get out of the trap of debt of land lords. I began reflecting the chain of manipulative, exploitative tactics of land lords through which they keep us bound in constant slavery and debt. All the members of our family work for the land lord and they always pay us in the form of loans and never give us our due salaries or wages. They keep on saying that we have adjusted your salaries and wages into the debt you owed to us and now you may take more debts according to your needs. When they pay the debt to us they say that they have written it in a book and once in a way after a year or two they read it out to our men that they owed to them so much. Since our men are illiterate they accept whatever amount of debt is declared by the land lords. The irony is this that the debt is always written double or triple times more by land lords in their books. We work so hard and keep on repaying the debt but it never get reduced instead it is always on the rise.

I was looking for a possibility of how to get out of the debt trap. One possibility I explored was that each family of our community who worked under land lord should maintain their own written debt record but the hurdle came up that who will write the debt record of each family since we did not have a single person educated in our community. Then a possibility came up when we heard that Umeed Partnership Pakistan (NGO) has planned to start an Adult Literacy Center for women in our Hindu settlement. The organization started a consultation process in our community and I went on convincing the women to register their names for the Adult Literacy Centre. Very soon about 30 women of our community registered their names in the nine month's training course. I was happy to avail this opportunity to get myself educated. I started studying as an adult student along with my age fellows. The organization provided us with books, stationary,

white boards, Charts etc. A supervisor and a female teacher from a nearby town ran our centre . for 2 to 3 hours daily except Sundays. Our teacher was wonderful and she taught us with great commitment and dedication.

In nine month's training we learned reading, writing and accounting skills. At the completion of the Literacy course 25 successful women of our centre got diplomas in a graduation ceremony organized by UPP. After the completing the course a real challenge before me was to convince my fellow women to maintain a written record of the debt they receive from the land lords. With the help of the organization we bought 25 account books and pens and gave to women trainees with a day's training how to write their debt record in their books. UPP also explained to their men and asked them to go the their land lords and find out the latest amount of debt written in their books and also inform them that you will also be keeping record of the debt. It is now a few year past and the debt of each family has gone to almost half. Now the land lords cannot cheat them and now there is some hope that within a few years we will be liberated from the slavery of land lords.