

SIMORGH

Women's Resource and Publication Centre, Lahore

Annual Report, 2020

Introduction

The year 2020 was challenging in terms of the project implementation strategies for Simorgh. The country was hit by COVID-19 and experienced three waves of coronavirus which unveiled the delicate situation of human rights in the country. Under the circumstances (complete/smart lockdowns) with the year was one of a country-wide pervasive economic, social, and political crises, Simorgh focused on two major points – the safety of our staff and target communities, and adapting our execution strategies to effectively achieve the outcomes set for this reporting year.

After comprehensive discussions with the project teams, fieldwork and communication were shifted to virtual channels such as WhatsApp groups and Zoom with physical communication being kept at a minimal level alongside necessary adaptations and revisions in project activities and implementation.

2020 saw the inception of a new project: From the “Politics of Vulnerability to the Politics of Voice”. Undertaken with the support of the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, its focus was on poverty mitigation through women’s economic empowerment. This year saw the completion of our four-year project: “Pushing the Boundaries- Extending Outreach”. The project comprised of two components (i) “Worlds in the Making - Pushing the Boundaries” and (ii) “Our Bodies - Our Lives - Pushing the Boundaries”, which focus on reproductive health and child sexual safety including underage marriage. Our project on women’s political empowerment, which is a component of FEMPOWER entered its second year in 2020. As all projects were being implemented during the Covid pandemic, activities comprised a combination of activities were conducted through a combination of virtual and in-person activities. Overall, despite the challenges and limitations, Simorgh was able to accomplish a significant percentage of the activities and objectives outlined for the year.

Covid Relief

The past year saw one of the greatest health and economic crisis in the world with the advent of COVID-19. The global pandemic, which led to nationwide lockdowns, loss of employment and livelihood, was one of the biggest challenges Simorgh had to face

in terms of project implementation and community outreach. Given the urgency of this crisis, and keeping the welfare of our target communities at the forefront, Simorgh provided financial assistance to its project beneficiaries. The relief funds were extracted from the budget allocated for activities that were planned for the year, but could not be conducted due to COVID-19 SOPs and restrictions. After significant social mapping to identify families in need, the relief was targeted toward female-led households, where women were the primary breadwinners. This decision arose keeping in mind that (i) women; their social, political, and economic empowerment is the focus of our work, and (ii) research has been found to show that when given financial responsibility, women are more efficient in budgeting and essential spending in comparison to men. During our Baseline Surveys, it was found that in a number of target communities, women did not have access to cellphones, due to the prejudice towards them by their community and family men. This challenge was overcome significantly through our project, “From the Politics of Vulnerability to the Politics of Voice”, during which we found that following the courses and workshops, approximately all of the women in the target communities possessed their own smartphones. This shift can be attributed to the fact that when women were contributing more actively to their household income, their male counterparts were less reluctant toward them possessing cell phones, or having agency in its various forms.

The distribution of relief funds was conducted online (i) owing to the prevalent health risks and (ii) to preserve the integrity of our beneficiaries and facilitate the seamless transfer. While online relief provided the benefit of increased outreach, smoother operations, and greater ease of access, it also presented several obstacles, including a lack of (i) digital literacy (ii) possession of individual smartphones (iii) Identification Documents (CNIC, B-form) and (iv) authentication and confirmation of funds transfer. Approximately all of our beneficiaries were able to obtain the funds successfully. However, due to the aforementioned challenge regarding cell phone possession, a few among them were unable to access the funds which could be traced to unwarranted intervention from their male counterparts.

This initiative has provided us with key information which will not only facilitate our baseline data collection but also inform future projects; their design and execution. Despite the myriad of challenges, collective efforts by all of our teams, their problem-solving capabilities, and adaptability allowed Simorgh to effectively execute its projects and produced high-yielding results.

Completed Projects

1. (a) Our Bodies – Our Lives – Pushing the Boundaries- Extending Outreach

Funding: Amplify Change

Project Location: Districts Lahore and Hafizabad

Target Communities: Women, female/male adolescents, Youth, Lady Health Workers/Visitors (LHWs/LHVs) Community men, Transgender persons, and Sex Workers.

Background:

Conceived in 2016, and assisted by Amplify Change, “Our Bodies - Our Lives - Pushing the Boundaries- Extended Outreach” focused on issues pertaining to SRHR and gender-based violence including the silence and stigma that surround SRH resulting in (i) misinformation and misunderstandings on these matters and poor access to appropriate health care, particularly among women and adolescent girls and boys and (ii) is reflected in policies and budgetary allocations for SRH. Direct project beneficiaries include women and adolescent girls, primarily school/college dropouts, individuals from marginalized gender communities, and female health workers, while indirect beneficiaries include community men and adolescent boys. Through information dissemination, advocacy, awareness, resource facilitation, and policy dialogues, the project aims to strengthen the reproductive health movement and accomplish the following goals:

- Facilitating confidence-building and effective communication in women, enabling them to identify and address various health concerns.

- Information dissemination and access provision to women, girls, and transgender individuals regarding SRHR, legal rights, and basic healthcare.
- Provision of age-specific life skills education to women and children.
- Diversifying targeted regions and introducing the project to women and girls in various communities.
- To address and mitigate stereotypes and stigmas surrounding transgender visibility, general health, and SRHR issues such as reproductive rights, contraceptive access, gender-based violence, and discrimination.
- Establish effective liaising with relevant communities, duty bearers, and policy-makers.

Implementation Activities:

- Baseline Survey
- In-house Capacity Building
- SRHR Advocates Meetings
- Online Zoom meeting with legislative, policymakers, and representatives of health departments
- Gender Sensitization Sessions with Male Medical Staff Members
- Health Hygiene/ First Aid Kits/ Flip Charts

Project Progress:

- Through interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), baseline data was collected regarding VAW and SRHR to facilitate project research and implementation. A sample size of 618 was determined, and findings were tabulated.
- 3-day in-house capacity building trainings were conducted in the Simorgh office discussing SRHR and various gender and health issues faced by women.
- 8 one-day meetings were conducted to shortlist SRHR advocates in project locations. 160 members were selected from target communities and identified as Champions/Advocates in their communities to facilitate extended outreach. These included LHWs/LHVs, Midwives and community women, community men, and youth.

- One-day evidence-based advocacy meetings were conducted via. Zoom. The meetings featured 178 participants including various legislative authorities, policymakers, bureaucrats, and representatives from the health and education departments. Research findings and data collected through the baseline surveys were shared in these meetings to discuss the various challenges surrounding SRHR and women's health.
- On-day gender sensitization sessions were planned to be conducted with male members of the medical/pharmaceutical community as a means of extending outreach and awareness regarding SRHR and gender-based health concerns.
- IEC material was produced, published, and disseminated among schools/medical staff/target communities to increase awareness regarding SRHR, health and hygiene, gender-based discrimination, and legal rights. 1000 storybook-based flip-cards and 2000 health and hygiene kits containing hygiene essentials and informative pamphlets were assembled, published, and distributed.

(b) Worlds in the Making: Pushing the Boundaries.

Funding: Amplify Change

Project Location: District Lahore and Gujranwala

Target Communities: Women, Female and male adolescents, Lady Health Workers/Visitors (LHWs/LHVs) Community Men, and Transgender Persons.

Background:

Conceived in 2016, and assisted by Amplify Change, “Our Bodies - Our Lives - Pushing the Boundaries” focuses on tackling issues of gender-based violence and SRHR among women and adolescents and challenging the stigmas and policies surrounding these concerns. Through skill-based learning and dialogue sessions with policymakers and communities, the project aims to strengthen the reproductive health movement and accomplish the following goals:

- Facilitating confidence-building and effective communication in women, enabling them to identify and address various health concerns.
- Information dissemination and access provision to women, girls, and transgender individuals regarding SRHR, legal rights, and basic healthcare.
- Provision of age-specific life skills education to women and children.
- Diversifying targeted regions and introducing the project to women and girls in various communities.
- To address and mitigate stereotypes and stigmas surrounding transgender visibility, general health, and SRHR issues such as reproductive rights, contraceptive access, gender-based violence, and discrimination.
- Establish effective liaising with relevant communities, duty bearers, and policy-makers.

Implementation Activities:

- **Managing Menstruation:** Information dissemination, experience sharing sessions, and skill acquisition among young girls and women on home-based production of sanitary napkins (commercially produced sanitary napkins not being an economically viable option in these groups and women normally recycle material for sanitary use, risking infection). The acquisition of this skill will meet an extremely prevalent need and the activity itself will serve to normalize the female body and demystify female ‘shame’.
- **Policy Dialogues** with 178 stakeholders including policymakers, parliamentarians, bureaucrats, and relevant health and education departments to facilitate healthcare and resource access for women in marginalized communities.
- 380 marginalized community members were trained through **health sessions** to discuss SRHR, hygiene, and health concerns among girls and women
- Financial relief for 116 affectees of COVID-19 residing in target locations.
- Production and distribution of IEC material regarding SRHR and relevant concerns among target communities. 1000 copies of Tri-lingual Flip Cards Storybook (pictorial) based on SRHR and related issues printed and distributed among the target population.
- Key influential persons including union councilors/stakeholders will support trained active agents and facilitate their work with the larger community on SRHR
- Theatre performance: A theatre performance was recorded and uploaded on Simorgh's website and Facebook page for a larger audience.
- **M&E “Mind 100 Changing Stories”:** Interview-based impact evaluation centering on women, youth, lady health workers, and transgender individuals.
- **Final Research Report:** Final research was developed based on field evidence through baseline surveys and Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) visits discussing SRHR-related problems for extended outreach and advocacy awareness. The report was shared through advocacy meetings with

parliamentarians, human rights activists, Health Department, youth, and educational institutes.

Due to COVID-19, a significant degree of communication was restricted to virtual avenues, impacting the execution of in-person community activities and trust-building. The pandemic and the resultant city-wide lockdowns caused several activities to be extended by a duration of 9 months. However, the shift towards online communication increased digital literacy skills among the women of these target communities.

Project Progress

Details of the project progress and developments observed during this reporting period are given below:

- During data analysis, we found that during trainings and activities conducted at target locations, participant numbers were higher than the predetermined target numbers, reinforcing the relevance and impact of the project. The number of beneficiaries reached through the training and activities was found to have exceeded the predetermined target number of **330**, with **380** beneficiaries exhibiting a comprehensive understanding of SRHR and related concerns.
- Data collection for community assessment and policy reform development was initiated, a 100 mind-changing stories (interviews) were conducted successfully from the target population including mothers, adolescent daughters, Transgender persons, Lady Health Workers, and family interviews.
- 1000 copies of tri-lingual, flip-card-based storybooks, highlighting SRHR and various issues on female health and hygiene were developed, and subsequently distributed among target groups. The target audience exceeded predetermined numbers, with 5000 individuals gaining access and relevant information regarding SRHR health concerns and services.
- Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Tools were designed to assess and evaluate project impact and information relevance.
- **Managing Menstruation:** 6 two-day workshops, attended by 300 participants was conducted to create awareness among target communities regarding

menstrual hygiene and the necessity of hygienic sanitary napkins.

Communities were also trained to produce sanitary napkins at home, creating an avenue for economic progress and mitigating the stigma surrounding women's reproductive health concerns.

- 63 (20 women, 43 male) participants including union councilors/other stakeholders report the rampant number of unreported child marriages within targeted communities and identify the laws that could be used to regulate this issue.
- Through the **M&E “Mind Changing Stories”** evaluation, 100 interviews were collected, detailing the impact of the project on information dissemination and advocacy.
- Health sessions were held in districts Gujranwala and Lahore. However, due to COVID-19 and the resultant lockdown, communication was obtained through WhatsApp. The sessions were facilitated by Ms. Munazza to facilitate service provision and conduct data collection. The key problem identified was infertility, which was extensively addressed and successfully treated, resulting in an improved relationship between resource persons and the target community. The project exceeded its target number of 120, reaching 173 beneficiaries.
- A webinar was conducted between **Simorgh** and **NUML** to discuss SRHR, sexual violence, and underage marriage. The webinar featured panelists Dr. Amjad, (Consultant: Family Planning/Infertility Department, GangaRam Hospital Lahore and Jannat (Track T: a transgender organization and Simorgh), both of whom are Amplify Change partners. The session resulted in a contract between Simorgh and NUML to continue a series of sessions in collaboration with the university.
- A one-day Policy Dialogue/ Evidence-Based Advocacy Meeting was conducted on November 25 in Lahore, to share research findings with policymakers, stakeholders, and representatives from health and education departments. Inspired by the stories from Simorgh's Medical Camp, a theater performance, titled “Kiran's Story” was exhibited at this meeting virtually, attended by 178 participants. The performance was also posted on social media channels.

- To provide financial assistance and relief to female breadwinners in targeted communities affected by the lockdowns and cutbacks imposed during COVID-19, Simorgh distributed funds among 116 beneficiaries residing in target communities to aid them in their economic crisis.
- Research, data, and observations were tabulated and compiled as an end-of-project report.

2. FEMPOWER – women’s political empowerment

FEMPOWER, Simorgh’s initiative for women’s political empowerment commenced operations in 2019 in collaboration with three partner organizations. With the main components being education, awareness, and advocacy, which were fulfilled through various programs including training sessions, dialogues with governmental bodies, and community outreach, the Simorgh team accomplished the following goals: successfully educating women about their rights, engaging more women in political domains, facilitating access to governmental bodies, and enabling women to develop the self-assurance needed to inform and influence the decision-making processes in their communities, without being pressurized by their male counterparts. The project has been funded by Global Affairs Canada (GAC) and aims at the socio-political empowerment of women in political spaces. Activities such as Advocacy Campaigns, Area Support Network Meetings, Focus Group Discussions, Gup-Shup Sessions, Local Government Workshops, and socio-legal journal – Bayan, were the key aspects of the project and its facilitation. A detailed breakdown of each of these activities is listed below:

Capacity Building Workshop (28th January – 3rd February): A five-day in-house capacity building workshop was conducted with the Simorgh staff to improve their project management skills. The activities included various sessions on project methodology, field research skills, and feminist knowledge building.

The final approval from GAC arrived in November 2019 and after the release of funds in December 2019, Simorgh initiated the project activities. From January 2020 to March 2020, the project team planned and conducted field activities. These included;

- Identification and selection of the target sites in three selected districts in Punjab; district Lahore, Kasur, and Toba Tek Singh.
- Selection of district Focal Persons and shortlisting of local Community-Based Organizations (CBOs)
- Identification and selection of union councils and local communities/CBOs in all three project sites.

Focus Group Discussions (January 2020 – March 2020): Organized focus group discussions were conducted by the project team at all three project sites; Lahore, Kasur, and Toba Tek Singh. A total of 13 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted with community women in various locations throughout the three districts; 5 FGDs were conducted in Lahore, 5 in Toba Tek Singh, and 3 in district Kasur. These FGDs identified the obstacles faced by women in political spaces regarding their rights, accessible services, and the visibility of women in governmental structures. The focus groups also allowed women to develop stronger relationships with each other, as well as with women in their community who were actively working in these areas. This, in turn, served as a source of inspiration for them to enthusiastically work towards their empowerment and emancipation.

In mid-March, the project faced a setback due to COVID-19, and in light of the nationwide lockdown, Simorgh suspended all field activities till June 2020. The project team had to modify their modes of working, shifting towards virtual means of communication. Meanwhile, online channels (WhatsApp Groups) were established for effective communication with focal persons, CBOs, and the target communities. To inform policy-making and legislative practices, online discussion sessions were also conducted to gather more detailed data regarding the project sites (social mapping, employment patterns, etc.).

COVID Relief Work (April 2020 – December 2020): After major discussions regarding the effective implementation of the project goals, Simorgh decided to use the project budgets for relief work. A cash sum of 5000 PKR was distributed among each of the vulnerable families residing in various locations throughout the project sites. Relief funds were drawn from the canceled field activities budget and transferred via. Easypaisa. Through their aid, Simorgh was able to establish trust with the communities and benefitted approximately 400 women in all three districts; Lahore, Kasur, and Toba Tek Singh.

IEC material on COVID-19 safety and awareness was also distributed among communities residing at the project sites, with the help of Simorgh's partner CBOs. Additionally, PPE suits, donated by Zaman, were also distributed among frontline workers at FEMPOWER project sites, such as the janitorial staff of the local waste management authorities.

In August 2020, the lockdown was lifted and office work resumed in person. Field activities were planned and developed to fulfill the annual targets, with key changes being lower participation numbers, open venues, and strict adherence to SOPs. However, the imposition of the second ‘smart’ lockdown caused certain field activities to be canceled, while the rest were executed with strict instructions.

Women Political Forum Meetings (August 2020): A total of 5 women political forum meetings were held with women councilors via. Zoom. Three of these were conducted with female councilors from Lahore, while the other two were held with councilors from districts Kasur and Toba Tek Singh. Through the baseline surveys, several women reached out to Simorgh, showing an interest in being part of the project. The activity also stressed several prevalent issues which were being faced by women in political spaces, and subsequent resolutions were proposed to overcome them.

Area Support Network Meetings (August 2020 – December 2020): In the year 2020, the FEMPOWER team consulted the focal persons from each district, and began the selection and sensitization of ASN members. An orientation was held with all the ASN members via. Zoom, where several issues were identified. Through this orientation, connections were established among political and government officials across various cities. In the year 2020, 2 ASNs were conducted in Lahore, 1 was conducted in Kasur, and 2 were held in Toba Tek Singh

Toba Tek Singh: The first ASN meeting was held on 28th August 2020 and the second was conducted on 21st December 2020. The meetings proved to be fruitful in regards to providing guidance and facilitation.

Lahore: The first ASN meeting was held on 17th September 2020 and the second was held on 16th December 2020. Despite the challenges, the meetings turned out to be productive in terms of facilitation and guidance concerning issues within the community.

Kasur: The first Area Support Network of district Kasur was held on 20th September 2020, which enabled successful liaison-building with the government officials, CSOs, and councilors.

Gup-Shup Sessions (December 2020): Simorgh conducted three trainings (online via Zoom) with female representatives from partner CBOs. Following their training, these women conducted a total of 28 sessions at 10 different locations in all three districts; 10 sessions in Toba Tek Singh, 10 in Kasur, and 8 sessions in district Lahore. Through these sessions, the project team was able to identify and analyze the issues within these communities which impact women (gender-based violence, lack of women political leaders, early marriages, etc.), and enabled them to discuss their concerns openly. Through these discussions, a relationship of trust and open communication was established between Simorgh and CSOs.

Socio-legal Journal – Bayan: The proceedings of work executed on the socio-legal journal of Simorgh are as follows:

January 2020:

- Planning of Advisory Board Meeting
- Formation of editorial policy
- Discussions regarding the possibility of an online publication of the journal.

February 2020:

- Routine editorial work in collaboration with the contributors
- Advisory Board Meeting was held on 28th February 2020
- Major decisions were made regarding the themes and issues of Bayan, the Bayan Website, and a possible introduction of an Urdu edition of Bayan to diversify the audience, and make the magazine more accessible to a wider array of people.

March-May 2020:

- Editorial work of Bayan volume I in process
- Identification of themes for the next volumes of the journal (volumes II and III)
- Selection and communication with the writers for Volume II and III
- Paper Writing in process

June-December 2020:

- Delays in the volumes due to the COVID-19 lockdown
- Commissioning, editing, and finalization of the content of Volume I
- Commissioning and decisions on the themes of volumes II and III
- After several discussions, a separate website was set up for Bayaan

- Bayan webinars regarding the published papers were also planned, for wider outreach and debate among civil society.

3. From the Politics of Vulnerability to the Politics of Voice

Funding: Embassy of the Kingdom of Netherlands.

Project Location: Union Councils in Districts **Lahore, Faisalabad, and Sialkot.**

- **Lahore:** Qainchi Amar Sidhu, UC 227. Yohanabad- UC 246. Baagriyan- Green Town-UC 236.
- **Sialkot:** Gondal, UC 40. Bhalanwala, UC 33. Chak Mandhar, UC 10.
- **Faisalabad:** Muzaffar Colony, UC 258. Baghbanpura, UC 206. Samnabad, UC 261

Target Communities: Women, Youth, Community Men, Local Duty Bearers, Labor union representatives (female and male), Local college students (female and male), School/college dropouts, and unemployed youth (female and male).

Introduction:

Designed primarily as a skill and capacity-based training program, ‘From the Politics of Vulnerability to the Politics of Voice’ aims to empower women and adolescents as agents of socio-economic growth and development. Through community engagement and the development of equitable income opportunities, the project is a step towards increasing women’s visibility and involvement on various social and cultural levels. In doing so, the project helps them identify, analyze and adapt accordingly to social, cultural, and administrative problems within the institutions of family, community, and state surrounding women; fostering spaces that allow for inclusivity and effective resource provision.

Through participant-led, need-based activities, the project aims to accomplish the following goals:

1. Make a significant contribution to breaking the social and economic isolation of women home-based workers and improving their status through capacity building activities comprising awareness of legal and social rights that will enable them to challenge patriarchal norms, address problems pertaining to their limited mobility and

low access to the market and its trends, particularly the low value placed on their economic contribution.

2. Build solidarities and establish grassroots women's leadership as part of a rights initiative in contexts where they have low access to voice and mobility and provide skill development training to enhance their economic and political potential.

3. Build linkages with trade unions, informal worker's collectives, the women's movement, etc., for engagement with social and political life and facilitate their transition to the formal economy.

Activities planned during the initial stages had to be suspended due to COVID-19 and the resultant lockdown. However, after extensive revisions of the project deadline and activities, the necessary amendments were made, with a majority of the communication shifting towards digital channels. On-site activities were redesigned to facilitate a smaller number of participants, so as to observe SOPs effectively.

Project Progress

After necessary revision, the following activities were conducted and completed successfully during the reporting period of 2020:

- Hiring and training of additional staff were undertaken and completed.
- In-house capacity-building workshops were held via Zoom for project staff. The workshops addressed concerns such as effective business planning, eligibility criteria, and procedure for small business loans, as well as necessary resource provision and self-esteem building to help economic empowerment among women.
- Three District Coordinators and 5 Focal Persons were selected from target districts Lahore, Faisalabad, and Sialkot, and MOUs were signed in collaboration with them.
- In light of COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown, revisions were made to the Baseline Surveys. A total of 450 participants were targeted through a hybridized data collection approach combining in-person interviews with Focus Group Discussions (FDGs) via Zoom. The discussions focused on highlighting the concerns faced by women in these communities, impacting their socio-economic empowerment.
- Through these discussions and activities, Baseline Data was collected, tabulated, and analyzed to identify the various constraints faced by the women

in these communities, including socio-cultural biases, lack of mobility, resource limitations, etc.

- 9 one-day meetings were held with stakeholders from TEVTA, Chamber of Commerce, Technical and Vocational Institute, Qasr-e-Behood, Sanat Zar, Microfinance, the Education Department, labor unions, and home-based workers. These meetings were centered on developing training manuals to assist women in different forms of trade.
- 5 pamphlets were produced, printed, and distributed among communities in target districts Lahore, Faisalabad, and Sialkot containing information regarding socio-political and economic empowerment.
- Tabulation, assessment, and compilation of project research and findings.

Networking

Simorgh works in close collaboration with a number of rights-based civil society organizations, academic institutions, and the women's movement in Pakistan.

Through our active role in activities such as lecture participation, information dissemination workshops, and capacity-building trainings, these partnerships are actively exercised throughout the year to encourage advocacy.

Conclusion

In all, 2020 was a challenging yet productive year for Simorgh. Despite the delays and setbacks caused by the pandemic, we were able to adapt well to the circumstance and accomplish several of our targets for the year. While the shift towards digital communication hampered effective trust-building within communities, it also allowed them to improve their digital literacy. The trials faced during this year provided us with a greater understanding of what to anticipate from the following year and helped us grow as an organization.