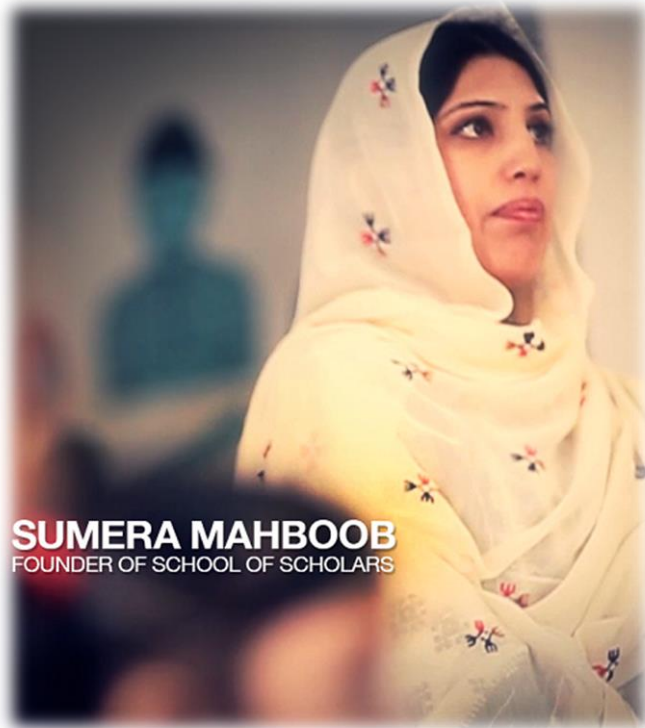


*Sumera Mehboob- the Daughter of Balochistan, Pakistan*



My name is Sumera Mehboob, I was born in a poor family belongs to rural area of Khuzdar, Baluchistan. My father's name is Mehboob Ali who had small job in government department and earning was not sufficient to fulfill the needs of the entire family. My mother's name is Hameeda Begum who was an absolute housewife. She was very responsible to entire home and complied with my father in every situation. In spite of very strict nature and embarrassing habits of my father, she had compromised with her life and never argued with him on any matter. My mother was illiterate and a victim of acute poverty. Since her parents died she was left alone, all relatives of my mother's sides disconnected the relations, and even

she was defrauded from the property. My mother's relatives were very much status conscious. On other end, our financial position was gradually being worst. All relatives became reluctant to keep relations and started avoiding us. Our poor living condition was highlighted on a very disgraceful manner which left a very negative impression on mother's personality. These pressures weaken my mother's confidence. Such emotional neglect compelled my mother to limit her life to her own family. My mother accepted all facts of life but hurting behaviors of her relatives. She gradually went into isolation and by the passage of time, she collapsed. Since I was very close with my mother, therefore I easily noticed her emotions and feelings at different points of time. She was broken from inside but always pretended as all is fine.

The early childhood was frightened and blenching. The overall environment of my surroundings caused depression and it got more furious when one of my elder cousins was killed on account of honor killing, her mistake was her decision to move another district for completion her matriculation. Days were passing and suddenly one incident broke my silence in front of my father when my father engaged my elder sister without intimation to my mother. My mother wept all night, from that incident, some changes came in my nature. I became bit out spoken in front of my father and any matter that cannot be discussed by my brother, sisters and mothers; I used to lead and tried to tackle the situation. I faced the humiliating behaviors of my relative in bold manners, never accept used dresses, shoes and other materials, I had one living approach that I will manage myself in a very limited resources but never ask favors from anyone. I used to go one of my uncles homes. He was very much nice to us. He was an educated man and a teacher. I took exposure whenever I met him. He used to give my books for reading, soon I released that education is a tool which can bring a change and give courage to face any type of situation.

I thought, if my mother was an educated person, her life might be different. My mother including brothers and sisters accepted the environment but for me it was hard to digest. I used to mobilize my mother to fight her rights with relatives even with her husband but she failed to do so. These feelings of loneliness and the sufferings of my mother made me stronger. I developed an eagerness to study and wanted to be something successful in my life so that I could give a comfort zone to my mother. I always remembered my mother's tears and how she suffered, this empowered me and given me a kick towards accomplishment of my objectives.

One of the hardest challenges I encountered was poverty, as my father never supported me or helped my mother with my school expenses. He never visited to school and I felt his absence deeply. Although my mother was uneducated but she always valued schooling but my father opposed the idea of his daughters studying beyond primary school. We were living in a village where life is very hard. Children growing up over there, especially girls are deprived of their basic rights. I faced many challenges to have access to education but my mother supported my studies and worked hard to give me an education. My mother found several part-time jobs to enable our sustenance and worked very hard in her free time like sewing women's clothes etc. My mother suffered considerable hardship to send me to school.

The school which I studied at was located very far from our house. I used to leave very early in the morning without transportation to reach my school on time. There was a hole in my shoe sole which made me difficult to walk while going and back from school. I did not all the required stationery in my school bag all the time. I had copies with fewer pages as heavy pages copies were not affordable which soon ended after completion of few home works. I used to face teacher's punishment over incomplete assignments due to unavailability of copies. Furthermore, the quality of education where I studied was very bad as we did not have enough qualified teachers.

I hardly done my matriculation and started tuitions for kids to bear expenses of my private studies. I never been to college and university which was a desire that I could but unfortunately due to different financial and social issues. Luckily, I got engaged in women empowerment programs in teenage at my own locality. By the passage of time, things being unpacked and level of my awareness regarding women issues were raised. I felt there are huge gape and no opportunities for girls who shape their lives. So I started my straggle from home but I realized that I need to improve my qualification and skill for bringing change in society. Yes it was not an easy job in a family and in a tribal society. I sold my mother gold earrings without telling her and purchased a desktop computer and pretended that my friend had given me for practice. Initially no one was there to guide me. Somehow I manage the internet connectivity and joined face book. After a sometime, I got connected a person who really later on turned out as a guide, teacher and adviser. This social media connection over years was proved a real revolution in my life.

The next challenge I faced was that my father and elders of my community forced me with the intention of marrying me whilst I was still in a struggle mode. I remember vividly, when I was working as volunteer under women empowerment programs, how my mother fought against stopping my rights education or forcing me into marriage. My mother

continued supporting and encouraging me until fulfillment of my dream. Despite of continues pressure of marriage from my family and relatives, I regretted and ignored my cultural practices at this point of moment. I faced criticism and hurting behaviors from my community but I took stand and made myself stronger for my community. I continued my struggle and took a bold decision. Despite of huge opposition, I joined non governmental organization named IDSP in Quetta (Capital of Balochistan Province) as intern for gender mainstreaming course with the support of my mother. I started my professional career in age of 19.

In this service period, I critically analyzed the gender issues in my society and my concepts became clearer. I realized gender role and gender gapes, these all injustice enhanced my interest to chose social work as my profession. I then released that like my mother, there are majority of the women in Balochistan form the marginalized segment is incapable of exercising their basic rights. The accumulated biases towards women have transformed into discriminatory practices over time. In rural settings, matters related to women are treated purely as family issues, with zero tolerance for intervention by judiciary and law enforcement agencies. Cases of domestic violence, harassment, inheritance and forced marriages are unilaterally decided by community elders. In general, most of their decisions go against women, and particularly against those women that represent low income and social strata. Even women are not given their due share in family property despite the legal and religious provisions.

This was the turning point of my life where direction of my struggler shifted from micro to macro level. The fight that I had been fighting to satisfy my mother sufferings now transformed into larger scale in interest of my community.

During my one year gender & development course I got best student award and qualified as staff and resultant to replicate this course at their district level for creating more local women leaders. Furthermore, 30 talented young women leaders were awarded as graduate in Khuzdar in the same year which was my first great achievement of life. Though that was not easy but by the grace of God I did it.

My struggle did not stop and I was selected as a Program Manager Baluchistan in another local organization PDI where I managed Oxfam GB and EU funded projects on community based disaster risk management & livelihood initiatives. Organization engaged 40 women groups in Baluchistan and benefited more than 300 women to build their capacity on human rights. I always welcomed those jobs in my life which had given me opportunity to work for community particularly for women. These platforms also helped me to polish my leadership and management skills gradually.

When I was peak of my career, I faced many up and downs in my personal life too and I was the only supporter of my family. I lost my fiancé in a road accident, kidneys of my brother were failed and transplanted, sister remained patient of Fits and mother was suffering from heart disease, in short my family desperately needed my attention, time and presence. But for the largest interest of my community, I did not stop my services and some how managed the situation. I requested my close friend to attend my family for the specific period of time. It was storming phase of my life and everything was in chaos but I

managed because I wanted to prove that women are leaders and they can face and sacrifice. Afterwards, I joined national organizations (SPO) as Program Officer & Gender focal person it was great opportunity where I explored Baluchistan other than the Khuzdar district. I closely worked with women and established 30 literacy and reflect centers where SPO granted 20 women livelihood project and engaged more than 500 women and they started their own small business in my supervision.

Another turning point of my life was that I took decision to apply for US fellow ship and lucky I qualified but it was big challenge that how women can go alone. but I believed that I can make things good for me and my society and I wanted to be a lesson for those girls who have talent and they are leaders but due to financial and family crises they could not take initiatives so I went and learned from there that I need to be more focused and must come on front. Hence I established my own organization with the name of Mechanism for Ration Change (MERC).

In early implementation phase, MERC with the support of Freedom of House, made computerizes national identify cards (CNIC) of 4000 women of Balochistan, Built the capacity of 71 government & private school teachers on joyfull learning and quality education and teaching methods by the support of youth organization, worked with more then 1700 youth and women on their health rights by the support of Awaz foundation for creating a health society. With support of Takmeel under the program "Teach a kid" 90 girls are enrolled and getting basic literacy and life skills in same school building in second shift. Also 50 women are benefited through livelihood project with support of PPAF, where women got chance to polish their indigenous skills of handicrafts and come up with new ideas of entrepreneurship. MERC also through its self initiative is providing opportunities to youth group to have positive engagements to promote peace and social harmony in the society.

Millions of girls and young women miss out on school. There has been progress but much work still needed to break down barriers that prevent girls from going to school such as child marriage and cultural discrimination. I am an educational activist in nature, enabled access to education for unprivileged children and supported the most vulnerable groups, and raised awareness of girls' empowerment through education. I launched many initiatives to support children, especially since the law and order situation was very much deteriorating in Baluchistan. I spread awareness of education among my community and youth groups. I am tried to inspire young people to advocate for this in many ways via social media and launching new initiatives.



I really wanted to work for education rights in Balochistan especially for girls education not

only sake of knowledge but in a sense of philosophy where children learn through experience, research, and form of holistic knowledge which is based on rights, advocacy and independency. I am an education advocate striving to change the attitude of people who are against women's education, despite opposition and threats from many community elders. I am the first from my family to be educated and began championing this right to education in my hometown. Children in Balochistan face many obstacles when trying to get education, such as problems of access, poor quality schooling or family pressure to go to work. For girls the situation is even more difficult, with many parents still viewing education as unnecessary and preferring that girls stay at home. This inequality planted a seed in me to change things.

I started thinking to establish an education system which is child friendly and build generation of great research oriented minds that would be foundation stone of producing future leaders as the current system of schooling cannot fulfill the requirements. Since I belong to the rural area of Balochistan, So I decided to establish my school in area where the children of down trodden class should take the benefit that will help them to come into the mainstream of all walks of life. Finally, I succeeded to achieve another milestone and established school for girls in 2015 in my community with the name of school of scholars.

I visited door to door to convince parents to send their daughters to school and warned mothers to educate their girls if they do not want their daughters to be treated in a similar fashion in the society and home as they are being treated. During this endeavor of going door to door to advocate for education, my life was threatened several times. The efforts resulted in the school growing into 135 students and five teachers.

Along this I delivered my services in school, colleges and universities around Baluchistan regarding fellowship as I am fellow of legislative fellowship USA and Acumen fellowship USA for engaging youth to take part and apply for fellowship and exploring world. Secondly I started leadership fellowship under MERC and engaged 6 young leaders for donating my skills and creating more leaders, thirdly I got opportunity to take support from Aliflila book society and establishing 300 libraries in all districts of even villages of Baluchistan which



definitely changed somehow lives of our kids, above all, I am General Sectary of Baluchistan women network for raising voice for women rights and opportunities of women in Baluchistan, giving my services in national Humanitarian network and advocating for disaster prone district of Baluchistan

After returning from Australia award, I had set

another target of establishment of women Corner comprising of Sewing & Stitching Course, Handicraft/needle work course with Outlet, Computer Training, English Language course, Beautician course with Polar, Cooking Course with food point, Healthcare & sport center, in district Khuzdar for the benefit of the women and destitute families of local community. The corner would not only polish their skills even they would express their ideas, practice and earn money in order to improve their living standard. It was planned with the dual aim of empowering 150 women and making them self sufficient alongside providing education and community development in compliance with SDGs. After continues running and follow ups, I succeeded to extract a place for women corner from Government & signed MoU for the largest benefit of my community.

I was also honored from different awards as youth champion. I received reason to smile award from Sensodyne Pakistan, Raising rhino Award from Acumen. I also received award from Australia award short course. There were the moments when I wanted to share my sentiments but I found no one to whom I could talk to. My mom departure and sudden death of my fiancé made me upset at large. I felt loneliness inside. Whenever I felt myself weak during my journey, I missed my mother very much. Many of my nights were passed with wet eyes. I started writing diary and poetry that helped me to exit from sad frame.



My story shows that no matter what the odds, determination can go a long way towards shifting attitudes and making change happen on the ground. I tried to prove that with perseverance, a young girl with a dream to help others can transform the lives of thousands.

Ultimately whatever I dreamt ten years before, it came true today. I feel empowered with my own identify. There was a time when I and my work were not acceptable by people, now they are with me and supporting my vision and contributing with me. They are following me and give my example to their daughters. The relatives those were disconnected now searching excuses and desperately willing to reconnect. I am so glad to share that I made my people understand that how education is important and how an individual is important. Now I can proudly say, yes I am the change agent and changed the mind set of my people. I proved the society that women are talented and trust worthy, they are leaders just they need opportunity, encouragement and appreciation. There was a time when I could not join colleague and university due to financial constraints, but time came when I visited one of the word's best universities, Queensland, Australia and got position in Women Executive Leadership Course. There was a time when I joined one of the leading Non Governmental Organization, Institute for development Studies and Practices-(IDSP), Pakistan as intern now I am Executive Board member of same

organization. There was a time when I was compelled to follow my community now I am leading my community. If my mother were alive today, she would have been happy to see the difference which was impossible with her support.

Although my dream came true but my journey still continues. There is never going to be an end point. But definitely, I am happy to complete a certain part of my journey as daughter of Balochistan, and that's given me new thoughts, mission and vision for rest of my life. Now I see my role as mother for my entire community. In next five year, I am going to establish a women corner for the real welfare of women at larger scale in district Khuzdar and start formal education system for orphans, street and special children, minorities and other vulnerable of adolescent group under our existing initiative of School of Scholars in order to enhance social cohesion and resilience in our society

*My story is dedicated to my mother. I love you mom*