

SanjhaVehra- A Conduit of Change

She wakes up at the crack of dawn to make her family's breakfast. This is only the start of her household chores, which are completed long after everyone else has gone to sleep. She disciplines her children so that they are ready to do battle with the challenges of the world, but also spoils them sometimes to make them realize how special they are to her. Through despair and bliss, she is a constant figure who stands unflinchingly by her family's side. Indeed, a woman is a phenomenal figure without whom the family unit is undeniably incomplete.

Many Pakistani women live extremely circumscribed lives. In most cases, families do not acknowledge a girl's right to education let alone her right to choose her own profession. Poor educational outcomes among women is a phenomenon that negatively impacts any country, leading to problems such as high maternal and infant mortality rates and the increased incidence of infectious disease¹. Thus, educating women and providing them with essential life skills is a national and global imperative.

Like many other Pakistani women, Shahnaz Bilal of Basti Malook (District Muzaffargarh) led a life limited to household tasks. No one around her had thought about her right to education, ambitions or talents. Fortunately, ITA Pakistan initiated the Sanjha Vera (SV) program, which aimed to provide early childhood development, to equip women with essential knowledge about health and hygiene and to develop their vocational skills. When the SV program was introduced in Basti Malook, Shahnaz enrolled herself and her children. This decision changed her life. Participating in the program gave her the essential skills and confidence to develop her talents as a beautician.

Today, Shahnaz is the proud owner of the first beauty parlor in Basti Malook. Women from her neighborhood and beyond come to her beauty tips, training, and treatment. Shahnaz's entrepreneurial venture has encouraged many other local women to enroll in the SV program. Thus, the SV program has been a conduit of change, allowing women to move beyond stereotyped roles.

¹ Pakistan's infant mortality rate has been recorded as 78 deaths per 1000 live births (USAID/Pakistan Office of Health, Maternal and Child Health)