

FINDING VOICE IN THE SILENCE AROUND MENTAL HEALTH

Story of Sadaf Ajmal

Breaking Barriers Women, Balochistan, Pakistan

Sadaf is a development professional and humanitarian activist based in Quetta, Balochistan. She holds a bachelor's degree in psychology, an MBA in finance, master's degrees in international relations and an MS in management. Over ten years, she has worked in disability inclusion, humanitarian action, gender equality, social justice, and mental-health and psychosocial-support programming, including Oxfam's Women, Voice and Leadership Pakistan project.

BBW is a women- and disability-led organization co-founded informally in 2015 and formally registered in 2019. It works in Quetta and across Balochistan with women, persons with disabilities, and youth affected by crisis, climate-induced disaster, poverty, and displacement. Its core team of four to five staff is supported by volunteers.

SADAF'S STORY





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“I WAS NOT FROM THE DEVELOPMENT SECTOR, SO MY BACKGROUND IS VERY DIFFERENT. BUT THE TURNING POINT STARTED IN MY LIFE AROUND 2010.”

— SADAF AJMAL

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A Turning Point Born From Love

Sadaf's sister, then a university student, was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS), a rare, incurable illness. Watching her education and social life narrow under the weight of disability and gender, Sadaf recognized the double discrimination carried by women with disabilities. In 2015 she joined an informal circle advocating for disability rights and inclusive access. In 2017, the work gained a name and registration plan: Breaking Barriers Women.

Building an Organization From an Empty Room

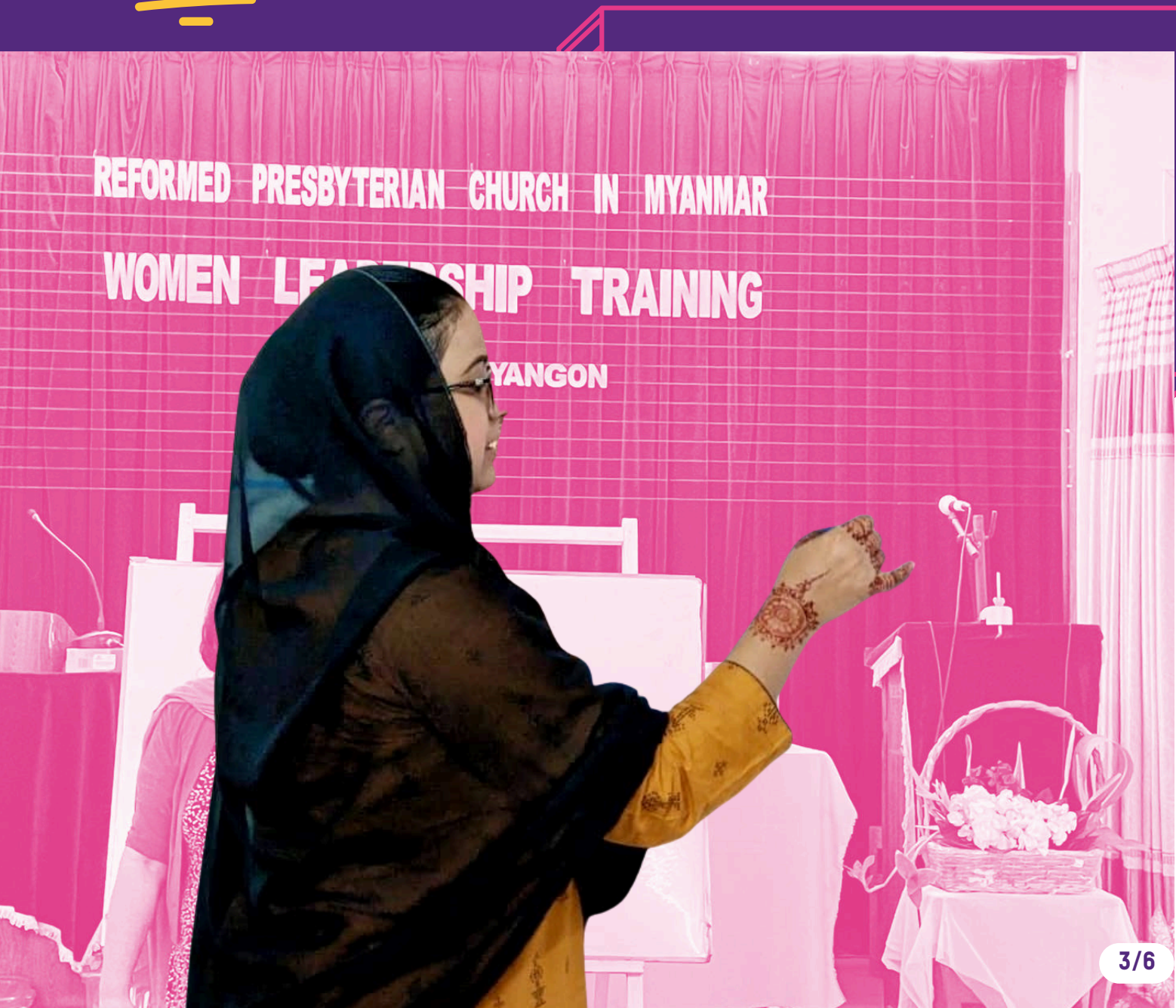
BBW was formally registered in 2019 and ran for three years without a single grant. Sadaf and volunteers funded activities from their own pockets and worked from one room with no washroom or kitchen. As the only woman in her extended family to enter the development sector, she was told women in the sector were not “good women” and that she was wasting her time. Today BBW has four to five permanent staff and a wider volunteer circle, a structure made especially important after the 2024 global funding contraction hit women-led organizations hardest.

“There was a lot of challenge. Still I've heard from the people that this sector is not for the women, and the good women are not working in this sector. But there was a passion, and only the passion leads me toward that.”



Voices of the Mind: From Friendship Circles to the Community of Change was delivered from 20 April to 15 June 2026 with a small grant of approximately 4,959 EUR under small-grants of Oxfam Hongkong. It was Sadaf's first initiative to name mental health directly, building on lived experience and prior psychosocial-programming work. Drawing on the Asia Feminist Humanitarian Leadership programme, she responded to the emotional toll of floods, earthquakes, drought, displacement, poverty, and other crises in Balochistan.

Evaluators valued the concept's relevance, feasibility, mental-health focus, and humanitarian and disability-inclusion lens. Sadaf revised the scope to fit the limited grant and six-week window.



Project Design and Activities



Rather than design for scale, Sadaf designed for depth. She chose five close friends as primary participants, four of them persons with disabilities, and prioritised trust before technique through two safe-space gatherings, a film-and-reflection session, a two-day mindfulness retreat in Ziarat, an ongoing WhatsApp peer-support group, and a live art exhibition and competition in Quetta that opened the conversation to artists, students, media, and the wider community.

The project made emotional wellbeing visible as part of humanitarian response. It created a setting where participants could discuss difficult experiences, build peer support, and carry the conversation beyond the small group into the wider community.



"I no longer believe that asking for support is a weakness. I have learned that supporting one another is what true friendship looks like."

— Zahir Shah, 46, Story of Change participant

What the Project Taught Its Own Leader

Sadaf carried the project through gallbladder surgery that confined her to bed for fifteen days, Eid holidays that scattered participants, and insecurity that restricted movement across the province, all within a six-week grant window. The experience changed how she understood her role.

“Meaningful change starts long before an activity. It starts with trust. My role was not to provide solutions, but to create an environment where people felt safe enough to find their own voices and support one another.”

The friendships became a support system that outlasted the project: participants check in on one another, help each other navigate physical barriers, and speak about mental health in their families for the first time. The deepest measure of success was how far trust travelled, not the number of people reached.

” Trust travelled further than the project. Participants continued checking in, supporting one another, and speaking about mental health at home.

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A Message to the Next Generation of Feminist Leaders

Sadaf asks the next generation to lead with courage, compassion, and inclusion. For her, feminism is not only about raising our voice; it is also about listening to those whose voices are often ignored. Leadership means creating conditions for people to speak, decide, and act for themselves.

Her message is grounded in the work BBW does every day: start with lived experience, make space for people most affected by crisis, and turn care into collective power.

"Lead with courage, compassion, and inclusion. Feminism is not only about raising our voice; it is also about listening to those whose voices are often ignored. Your leadership is not measured by how loud you speak, but by how many people you empower to speak for themselves."

— Sadaf Ajmal



SHIFT Asia (Supporting Humanitarian Initiatives for Transformation in Asia) drives gender-transformative change by advancing women's local humanitarian leadership.

Breaking Barriers Women is an awardee of the Asia Feminist Humanitarian Leadership Program in 2025. SHIFT Asia promotes Sadaf's story as an example of locally led, gender-transformative action.

