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Car-van leaders

From domestic workers to professional drivers

10 women from low-income households willing to become drivers selected

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Equipped with new skills, Ibrat Shaheen is looking for broader horizons. "I can finally count myself among the literate women of society. I can read Urdu, sign my name in English and even check my children's homework. Even the road signs make so much sense now. It's a new feeling altogether," she told *The Express*

Tribune at the passing-out ceremony of "Women Car-Van Leaders Project" at a local hotel on Tuesday.

Shaheen, 37, who previously worked as a domestic helper in Ameerpoora, Rawalpindi, said she is better equipped to support her five children and her elderly husband, who suffers from frequent seizures of epilepsy.

Under an initiative to empower women, 10 participants were imparted professional training in driving, functional literacy and self-defence mechanisms.

Similarly, Aliya said she had

"I have saved enough from my monthly stipend and travel allowance to send my children to school and afford pick and drop

New driver Aliya

found a new purpose in life. "At first people would point fingers at us, asking where do all these women go. But my husband is here and he has been very supportive of me, which is why I was able

to complete the training." I have saved enough from my monthly stipend and travel allowance to send my children to school and afford pick and drop. I can provide for my family," stated Aliya, who is now working as a driver at a private company.

Aurat Foundation Advocacy Director Rabeea Hadi explained the selection process of the women. "We surveyed 200 households in the Shakriyal community of Rawalpindi and held community meetings to identify the women who wanted to pursue driving as a career and had the neces-

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sary family support to do it," she said.

When asked about what lies ahead for these women, Hadi said the foundation did not only impart training but was also working on linking them to the labour market. The

foundation was collaborating with other women's rights organisations to provide the women drivers a conducive environment to earn a livelihood.

The foundation plans to introduce the newly-trained women drivers to the market for skilled workers. "Aurat Foundation has taken the initiative to hire some of the women," she added.

Aurat Foundation Chief Operating Officer Naeem Mirza said the project had helped the women break the shackles of domestic labour and empowered them to live and work with dignity.