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# Digital Connectivity as a Springboard to Professionalisation: Social Media Groups of Pakistani Women

Faiza Muhammad Din

## Abstract

In Pakistan, female entrepreneurs and earning women encounter considerable challenges when trying to enter male-dominated job markets. Many turn to women-only social media groups as a forum to discuss these obstacles and share strategies for overcoming them. Unlike conventional, more bureaucratic networking avenues such as chambers of commerce, these online platforms offer flexibility and continuous connectivity. This proves especially beneficial for women during significant life events like maternity or caregiving breaks. In Muslim-majority countries, these groups also serve as platforms for exchanging culturally and religiously relevant business practices, including discussions on halal investments and Sharia-compliant entrepreneurship. This study employs online ethnography and interviews with key stakeholders in some of Pakistan's most prominent women-focused online networking groups. While one might assume that the primary aim of such professional networks is to discuss business growth, cutting-edge research or technology, these groups actually thrive on a common language, shared challenges and shared values. The article begins by exploring the concept of professionalism and the role of community and networking in career advancement. It then delves into the specific challenges that make networking difficult for women in Pakistan but paradoxically act as a glue binding them together in these online spaces.

**Keywords:** Pakistan, women entrepreneurs, professionalism, networking, social media groups, digital ethnography

Achieving professional status involves higher education, apprenticeships, obtaining a license and acquiring accreditation. Formal recognition for professionals is conferred by associations that maintain social closure and restrict access to their exclusive communities. They constitute a system of interconnected roles and social relationships that facilitate the pursuit of professional goals. To maintain a career, one must adeptly navigate these networks, a task that can be challenging for groups historically underrepresented in such circles. For

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instance, businesswomen in Pakistan face challenges due to the male-dominated structure of most trade unions. These structures hinder their ability to connect with appropriate suppliers, vendors and customers. In these circumstances, social media networks provide an effective alternative for businesswomen to establish connections, garner credibility and accrue social capital. Moreover, these networks offer flexibility in terms of time and space, proving especially advantageous for addressing challenges related to mobility and access.

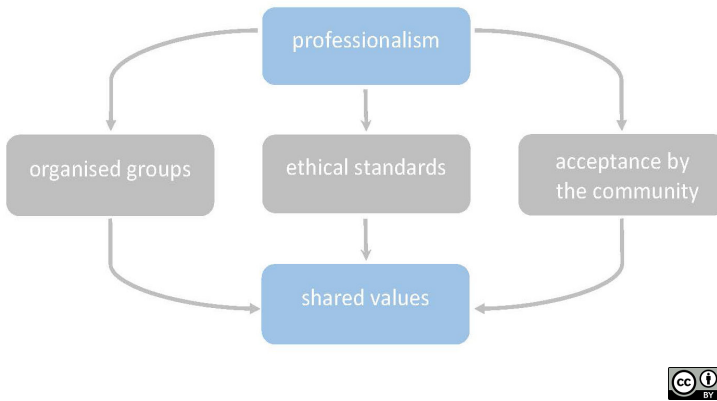


Figure 1: The journey to becoming a professional (compiled by Faiza Muhammad Din)

According to available research and literature, professionals are defined by their expertise, standardisation, and accountability within their respective fields (Dent et al. 2016). To become a professional, individuals must possess the proper knowledge and skill set, applying these skills consistently. Furthermore, professionals are expected to take responsibility for their work, and their profession serves as a source of income. In essence, professionalism encompasses three key components: 1) network formation and occupational closure (informed by sociology); 2) expertise, standardisation and accountability (as understood in everyday use); 3) the receipt of income.

Determining when a task, occupation or work becomes a profession, and when the actor becomes a professional, can be challenging. According to Wai-Fong Chua and Stewart Clegg (1990), professionalism is associated with closure rules (such as entry requirements, salary awards and grade differentials), texts and linguistic statements (for example, key editorials of professional journals, statutes and pronouncements by powerful coalitions and individuals). It emphasises not only the nature of the work performed but also the context in which it takes place. Moreover, professionals are usually expected to uphold certain ethical standards and conduct themselves respectfully toward their clients. Finally, professionals typically affiliate with an organisation or association that establishes rules and standards for the field. While not all occupations require all these characteristics, most professions possess at least some degree

of social closure, indicating the exclusive nature of the profession and the difficulty for others to enter the field.

Social closure is essential to the concept of classic professionalism. Numerous studies have documented that the professionalisation process involves a complex network of strategies to elevate status, establish exclusive knowledge and practice domains, and eventually close off the field from external competition (cf. Macdonald 1985, Malin 2000: 69). Classic professional bodies in fields like medicine and law are recognised for their exclusionary strategies, such as high membership fees and systematically exclusive structures (Saks 2016). However, the female networks in Pakistan that I examined are notably inclusive, providing numerous free or low-cost online courses to train other women. This indicates that, for the social media networks I studied, social closure is not a top priority. Instead, their shared goal of growing as a community takes precedence. The only consistently excluded group is the male audience. These “sisterhood networks” are women-only, private and closed Facebook groups that enable the members to form a community of trust where they feel comfortable sharing their views.<sup>1</sup> The strong bonding among members is rooted in shared religious and cultural values. These groups play a pivotal role in establishing sustainable forms of entrepreneurship due to their profound understanding of the local culture and religion (Khan 2020). The social capital embedded in the network of relationships provides members with access to resources and support that can be used to achieve shared goals.

In recent years, Facebook has emerged as one of the most popular social media platforms, and its group feature has made it an even more powerful tool for networking and information sharing. While many individuals utilise Facebook for personal purposes, an increasing number of businesses and professionals leverage Facebook groups to connect with potential customers and colleagues. This trend is especially true for female entrepreneurs and businesswomen in Pakistan, who utilise Facebook groups to establish their own supportive communities. During the period from 2020 to 2021, I joined numerous Facebook groups of businesswomen and female entrepreneurs in Pakistan, as well as those of Pakistani women living abroad.<sup>2</sup> I studied a number of these groups and followed the discussion threads for the following three years. I contacted group administrators and conducted online interviews with those who responded. The findings, based on twelve in-depth interviews, are presented in this article, with a list of the groups studied provided in the appendix.

During episodes of the Covid lockdown, I opted for Facebook groups over Instagram or LinkedIn for this digital ethnography, as they are also a widely

1 The selection of the term “sisterhood” is influenced by a prominent social media group, the Soul Sisters Pakistan.

2 The study also included Pakistani expats, which are representative of the population of the social media groups studied.

used social media platform for business purposes. The Facebook interface is more conducive to sharing information and forming groups with mutual interests, allowing users to create groups with like-minded individuals, facilitating networking and community building. Additionally, the Facebook interface incorporates features that enable users to control who can see their posts, giving them more privacy control. It is also comparatively more popular amongst millennials and older individuals, who are the age group of interest to my study, as they are at an advanced stage of their professional journeys.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, some of the most active and influential group administrators and members are Pakistani women who have relocated to other countries, such as Gulf countries, Europe, Canada and the United States. Therefore, for the sake of representative data, I have included two examples of groups from Saudi Arabia, two from Germany,<sup>4</sup> and eleven groups from Pakistan.

I have used anonymisation, concealing or altering the names and locations of those interviewed. The names of groups included in interviews have been omitted, and instead, comparable groups are mentioned in the appendix. Admins of selected Facebook groups were interviewed online for over an hour. The interview questions covered their career journeys, motivation for starting the groups, how they sustain motivation for group moderation, which is not a direct source of income, the activities they organise, and their approach to concepts like women's empowerment and feminism.<sup>5</sup>

## Women entrepreneurs in Pakistan and as expats – recurrent issues

Growing up in Pakistan, I observed a scarcity of women-owned businesses in my surroundings. The few female entrepreneurs I encountered were predominantly door-to-door vendors selling cosmetics and toiletries.<sup>6</sup> They worked as resellers, purveying home ornaments and everyday items for women, but also included women skilled in handicrafts, catering to the shopping needs of their

3 Certain users express concerns about the potential misuse of their personal data by companies, leading them to create their private social media platforms. For instance, the initiative Rising Above, launched publicly on 1 February 2022 by one of my interviewees, addresses this concern (<https://risingabove.social/>). However, the challenge was how to sustain it versus tech-giants. Also, getting people to sign up for new platforms was not easy.

4 Given that I reside in Germany and therefore have access.

5 These groups promote women's empowerment; however, their understanding of this concept might not necessarily be the same as that of feminist organizations. Most were critical of the approach of the celebration of women's day (Aurat March), which saw a renewed boom since 2018, arguing that it focused on unimportant issues and distracted the larger society from actual problems. Many referred to Islam as the solution to their problems.

6 One notable instance was featured in a brief documentary by BBC (see [https://www.facebook.com/bb-  
cnewspashto/videos/2595344630524347/](https://www.facebook.com/bb-<br/>cnewspashto/videos/2595344630524347/)). Another reference to this can be found in Begum Shaista S. Ikramullah: *From Purdah to Parliament*. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1998.

female peers. The business scope of some of these women extended beyond cosmetics to encompass a diverse range of articles and services. Examples included homemade food, baked goods, crockery, jewellery, ladies' and children's clothing and cosmetics. When I studied the social media groups, I observed a continuity. The female vendors online sold similar items to the vendors in a broader sense of categories. However, the clothing businesses covered a much wider range, from reselling clothes from wholesale vendors to modest and branded attire, unstitched and stitched garments in both Western and Eastern styles, and formal and casual wear. Women involved in catering businesses offered a wide array of food options, as well as event management services, customised cakes, theme-based confectionaries, preservative-free frozen foods and home-made lunch delivery services. Some specialised in local cuisine, catering to both high-end and economic segments. Additionally, community pages promoted locally-made everyday items such as crockery, bedspreads and decoration pieces.

Facebook pages and WhatsApp groups have emerged as invaluable tools for entrepreneurs, particularly women, to reach a broader audience and expand their businesses. These platforms help them connect with like-minded individuals interested in their products or services. The target audience and focus of each group can vary based on their rules, policies and preferences. Admins and moderators play a crucial role in reviewing and approving posts before publishing them online. These groups also conduct competitions, giveaways and awards to celebrate active participants and those reaching certain milestones, such as a certain number of followers or sales targets. Meetups are organised for socialising and connecting. Since the chamber of commerce is perceived as an upper-class domain, women from other economic strata prefer to join online groups where they feel like equals. One group admin shared that:

For every [in-person] meetup, I spent a whole day on preparation. Then, on the day, I had to arrange childcare, and the next day, I was tired. So, for three days, instead of earning, I spent my money on transportation to visit women who were well off and from a completely different [socio-economic] class. They did not need to support their families. They are appreciated and rather also received sponsorship. But I realised that most women like me could not afford [external] childcare. Instead, they can stay at home and work at their ease. [...] To promote women's economic activity, I have a paid WhatsApp group. The membership fee is 1500 Pakistani rupees. I teach them how to use networking to become resellers for clothes. Since many teachers lost their jobs during corona times, they could earn some [additional] money through reselling jobs, using WhatsApp and Facebook networking. For women in food delivery and catering businesses, I help with menu planning and scaling. In the paid WhatsApp membership, I provide consultancy on how to create their logos and market their products. (Facebook group admin C1, interviewed on 13 April 2021)

In Pakistan, women often initiate their professional journeys within gender-segregated social groups. This pattern arises due to the prevalence of gender-segregated schools, colleges, universities and public parks in the country. As a result, many women initially find it more comfortable to participate in women-only

groups. However, over time, some women gradually build trust in male clients and suppliers, eventually transitioning to working collaboratively with them. This gradual shift allows women to proceed at their own pace and fosters the growth of confidence in their abilities. As one group admin stated:

Women are usually not comfortable in the presence of men. So, I work for women and children. Initially, we catered [in our community events] to women only but later opened in some sections of work to men as well, as [working women] started to get support from men in their families over time. It was helpful to expand the scope of work and [for men and women to work together] as families. (Facebook group admin A2, interviewed on 4 May 2021)

However, a majority still preferred women-only groups. This situation occasionally leads to discussions that may involve multiple (sometimes conflicting) opinions presented by group members.

Another recurring theme and concern intensely discussed in the examined Facebook Groups is parenting. Especially when raising children as expats, women often face unique challenges, dealing with issues such as language barriers, unfamiliar school systems, and cultural differences. Several online platforms help in connecting women with similar interests and experiences. To understand their shared values and goals, I will focus on two recurrent themes from the interviews: a) parenting and b) women's life as expats. In their interviews, most respondents discussed parenting as an important factor influencing their career decisions. As expats, the local licensing traditions and protracted qualification processes often hindered them from practicing their professions due to the social closure practices of professional associations in the host countries. The absence of extended family support in childcare also curtailed their career options.

## Parenting and care responsibilities

Does the topic of parenting find space in a professional setting or on a networking platform? Many professionally qualified women have had to take career breaks due to caregiving and parenting responsibilities. However, they resumed (or attempted to resume) their work through online ventures, such as the telemedicine initiative Marham, a prominent tele-health platform.<sup>7</sup> Within the social media groups for women, they find ample space to discuss such issues and seek peer support for coping mechanisms and best practices. The groups use various strategies to organise different topics, employing methods like hashtags and dedicating specific days for particular themes like parenting, promoting businesses, matchmaking and more. In some cases, parenting becomes a subpage of a larger platform. These spaces assist parents by addressing shared issues and challenges, offering tips, strategies and best practices. Pages cover topics related

7 See <https://www.marham.pk> (accessed 20 December 2023).

to parenting babies, toddlers and teenagers, and even to understanding boundaries as adults.<sup>8</sup> Shared concerns about parenting and teaching children Islamic values are common concerns.

The groups cater to middle-class families navigating the melting pots of urban centres. Most topics focus on the tension between two conflicting sources of values and ethics: religious morality versus individual liberty; local culture versus globalisation; extended family versus nuclear family. Many discussions emerge from these potentially conflicting ideals, which are then moderated according to the group policy by the admins. In groups run by life coaches and consultants, they introduce people to their services through free online video sessions and introductory videos on YouTube.<sup>9</sup> These free online sessions serve simultaneously as teasers for marketing and awareness campaigns.

Seema, 33, is a mother of three who manages a home-based business specialising in frozen foods and owns a retail shop featuring products from women-owned businesses in Pakistan. With a Master's in Business Administration she found it challenging to juggle caring for her children while maintaining a 9-to-5 job. So, she transitioned to a home-based business and extended her assistance to other women. For Seema, work and family were not separate spheres; instead, she had to find a way to manage both. She shared her perspectives on parenthood in an interview:

We force kids to study to get a job and ask them to pray for the sake of doing the obligatory. Instead, our focus should be on skill-building, slowly asking them to become responsible and accountable. We should make them learn to become responsible owners. I started to read about my country, my religion. Pakistan is blessed with nice weather, natural resources and fertile lands. We have the best fruits and vegetables. The English language and English systems have been imposed on us, which does not help us develop. I would like to have an open-air education system. We should focus on satisfactory, peaceful and happy living rather than good jobs. Our children should be able to enjoy the weather and not always be indoors playing games. These are tools for those who do not have the possibility to go out. We put a two-year-old into schools to learn English. Long schooling hours also take them away from nature. I try to promote natural remedies and avoid antibiotics. [...] Parents just want their children to score high. They treat them like racing horses. Even if they score 90 per cent, their parents ask for more. I have a WhatsApp group where I keep sharing the knowledge about the ideas of how to spend quality time with children and get them interested. [...] So, I also prioritised my children. When they were young, I worked on the catering orders only after they were asleep. (C1, interviewed on 13 April 2021)

8 Cf. <https://www.facebook.com/ParentingAndRelationshipCoaching/> (accessed 17 December 2012).

9 Cf. Parenting and Relationship Coaching Pakistan, <https://prcpakistan.com/> (accessed 17 December 2021).



## Connecting as expats

Within expat groups, women share their experiences, expertise and knowledge regarding matters that expats typically require. The abundance of information on websites and the complexities of numerous bureaucratic processes often leave newcomers feeling overwhelmed. When individuals post their questions and problems in the group, experienced members who have encountered similar situations provide insights and personalised advice. Additionally, the existence of a group exclusively dedicated to addressing their unique challenges proves very helpful for women. A common issue for which the group members seek guidance is navigating bureaucratic hurdles in a foreign country. The social media groups provide solutions for challenges related to settling in a new country, such as obtaining a driver's license, navigating bureaucratic requirements for visas, employment and business, finding halal food, managing children's schooling and addressing nutritional concerns. The shared values of religion and culture play an important role in fostering connections among the group members. The administrator of one expat ladies group shared that, for her, Islam takes precedence, followed by culture and then feminism:

I am a feminist, and I believe Allah gave a woman the space which was acquired much later. I don't want to boast; I am active in a mosque which is a community centre where I collaborated with an Arab and two Turkish women. We have an Islamic studies class in the local language for the children. Every Saturday, we have an online Islam seminar. We have the support of our Muslim community in it. It is central to my life. I never want it to be a second priority. We need to follow it and be the role models for our children due to our minority status as Muslims. We also need to work on our teenagers when children have many questions. And we have to help them find the answers. I taught my children to eat halal and *tehzeeb* [culture]. With the mosque, I got active and got to learn about different traditions within Islam. I have also studied the translation of the Quran for 15 years in weekly classes. I learned how to recite the Quran. Since the pandemic started, the sermon was opened via Zoom to women from other countries too. (Facebook group admin B1, interviewed on 16 September 2021)

Religious services for expats are also crucial, since one of the ladies' groups was formed when a Muslim lady passed away, necessitating funeral rites, but the lack of knowledge and network made the organisers aware of the need to create a support network specifically for women. A young mother died of cancer, and her condition was not widely known among community members. Preparing for her funeral rites in accordance with religious obligations posed a challenge, and an emergency arrangement had to be made. Another incident involving domestic abuse prompted the initiation of a Facebook group to support women in the community and openly discuss such issues. The administrator, having travelled to Europe after marriage, could not continue her education after graduation due to the absence of English-language courses at local universities. Starting afresh by learning the local language, she likened the experience to being a "new-born baby". It was a challenge to visit offices or the doctor

independently in the beginning. Over time, she adapted, but recognised that many young expat women faced similar hurdles. The group, now nearly a decade old, has also organised meetups for expats to provide them with opportunities to socialise.

Many expats were educated women who could not find jobs due to language barriers and care responsibilities. This also puts some women in a vulnerable position. So, I keep a set time for work as a Facebook admin, and for some alerts, I respond immediately. If there is an anonymous query, usually people are in dire need. [...] It is our concern to keep the anonymity of the members who want to stay anonymous, and also, we try to check the IDs before adding, so that a male is not added who can misuse personal information or spread it. We are answerable to God. (B1, interviewed on 16 September 2021)

When the members of that particular group exceeded 1000, another active member, a trained lawyer from Pakistan, joined her as an administrator. Her capacity to offer legal advice proved instrumental in assisting numerous women facing precarious situations, leading her to prioritise social work as her primary job. While she initially pursued an active career as a lawyer in Pakistan, she later got married and relocated abroad to join her husband on a family reunion visa. However, she encountered obstacles in practicing law, requiring additional training to obtain a license at her new destination and learn a language from scratch. She shared that:

When I arrived in an environment where I didn't know the language, culture and environment, I continued my social work instead. Women face many issues when they arrive here via family reunion visas. So, I realised the need to learn a language and started social work. Since women did not feel comfortable sharing their stories, we provided a women-only safe space to share their problems. I also started to look up solutions for their problems and familiarised myself with the local legal system when I was at home taking care of my toddler. We have helped many domestic violence victims. I got in touch with local lawyers and social workers. So, we connect these women with relevant persons when they need them and guide them about the steps to seek help. (C2, interviewed on 7 November 2021)

As not all comments come from experts dealing with the issue, not every comment proves helpful. However, providing a space to open up about one's challenges is beneficial for those who lack a support group. Some legal experts in these groups assist victims of domestic abuse and guide them on how to navigate the obstacles they face. Similar successes have been seen in other awareness groups focused on health (Lai et al. 2015, Zhang et al. 2015). One interviewee openly talks about her experience of going through domestic abuse in marriage and divorce, as it helps others share their challenges too. Many women often find themselves in precarious situations due to domestic problems and need to earn to overcome their problems and financial dependence.

They need knowledge about the business world, emotional support, and healing from trauma. By networking, some women started promoting small businesses as well. This group provided them with a place where they learned about their possibilities of starting

home-based small catering and reselling businesses. However, our group's focus is less on business promotion and more on support and counselling. If people face problems from family, in-laws, or a husband, they feel pressure and lack support as expats. Then those women, who did not work all their lives, do not want to work now. We also arrange translators for people. There is a sixty-year-old woman whose husband divorced her recently, and she is weak and depressed. I will visit her regularly to help her go through this challenging time. (C2, 7 November 2021)

Many women who moved abroad had to leave their jobs due to a shift in care responsibilities. Without family support in the new country, they had to prioritise their families over their careers. They network and organise on social media, usually within their local community and related to their homeland. Through these groups, they can support each other in adapting to their new lives while keeping their families together. One admin shared:

I was ambitious and a good engineer. I was in a good position already when moving abroad. But when I came here, I could not manage because we had to deal with everything ourselves and there was no domestic help or family to support. (A2, 4 May 2021)

## Motivations for online networking

The most successful social media groups are often those established to address specific needs, initiated by women with first-hand experience of the challenges at hand. Built on a foundation of mutual needs and support, these groups have the capacity to thrive and experience exponential growth. Careful consideration is given to admitting members, with a focus on maintaining a safe and respectful environment. For the individuals within these networking teams, the journey is frequently one of self-discovery and personal growth. Beginning as learners who recognise a problem in need of attention, they evolve over time into leaders tasked with the administration and moderation of the group.<sup>10</sup>

The moderators distribute responsibilities based on their respective expertise. Given the absence of remuneration, most of them express their motivation as a desire to help fellow women and “not be remembered as someone who was self-centred and lived only for herself” (B1, 16 September 2021). Another admin shared that her goal was

[...] helping people understand themselves and their capacities to help them reach the purpose for which Allah created them. My elders gave me the spiritual name of the guiding light. I help people find their way and empower them to become whom they are supposed to be and fulfil the purpose for which Allah sent them to the earth. (Facebook group admin A2, interviewed on 4 May 2021)

<sup>10</sup> See the interviews with Facebook group admin A1 on 14 September 2021, with A2 on 4 May 2021, with Facebook group co-admin B2 on 21 September 2021, and C2 on 7 November 2021.

An admin who has overseen her Facebook group for the past seven years responded:

What keeps me going is the wish that I do not want to leave as a useless piece when I leave this world. When people remember me, they remember me in good words, rather than thinking that she lived for herself and left after doing it all for herself. (B1, 16 September 2021)

Other interviewees shared similar thoughts:

I am not a person who offers prayers regularly, keeps saying supplications or claims to be a pious person. But when I am in a problem, I always feel supported by Allah. I told Allah that I cannot offer many prayers, but I want to make your creations happy. (C1, 13 April 2021)

Before I die, I would like to have a few people whose lives I positively impacted. Islam is a part of us. Allah is inside us nearer than the soul. The world was created for the love of the Prophet. Our existence is based in religion. It is part of everyday life. Initially, I used to read so many books and get inspired. But now, I closed those books and focused on why Allah created me, who I am, and the purpose of my life. We should implement the teaching of the Prophet in our life. Islam is the core; I try to follow my religion and its teachings in my personal and professional life. To praise Allah and help his creation. (C3, 3 June 2021)

“While religious piety may be seen as incompatible with professionalism in the secular Western world, analysis within a Muslim society indicates otherwise” (Oktaviani 2021: 56). In many cases, women initially formed groups and circles (*halaqa*) for religious learning, offering rituals and assisting fellow beings in the shared pursuit of piety. This provided a platform for connecting with like-minded people, fostering strong bonds with those who shared their faith and values. This was crucial not only for social support, but also for networking and exchanging ideas. The community that developed through this religious learning was supportive and inclusive, serving as a valuable resource for its members today.

Saba Mahmood’s *Politics of Piety* pioneered the literature, highlighting piety movements among Muslim women (Mahmood 2012). Additionally, various works shed light on the diverse forms and settings in which religious knowledge was imparted to and by women (cf. Bano 2017, Sanyal 2020, Ahmad 2009). Study circles, women’s madrasas, missionary activities and sisterhood networks converged around women’s interest in learning about sacred texts. Women from different professional backgrounds find networking opportunities on religious knowledge learning platforms. Because female scholars of Islam, in the majority of cases, do not hold traditional leadership roles like prayer leaders in the mosque or madrasa, they must carve niches to express their piety. Hence, there is an increase in expressing piety in their entrepreneurial ventures, particularly among women (Ghasemi 2015, Kloos 2019). However, some criticise these practices and categorise the visibility of religion as Neopatriarchy and ethnic privilege (Habiba et al. 2016, Ali / Syed 2018).

## The online bridge to the bazaar

Care roles and responsibilities compel numerous qualified Pakistani women to remain at home. These qualified professional women utilise their spare time away from care responsibilities to seek online work. Moreover, as the workplace often fails to align with religio-cultural expectations, many women use their skills and qualifications to engage in remote work from home. As one social media group admin put it:

This has led to a boom in online consultancy, freelancing, and commerce amongst [Pakistani] women. Not only does this allow them to find work that is compatible with their religious beliefs, but it also gives them the flexibility to care for their families. (C2, 7 November 2021)

While many of these businesses begin as e-commerce activities, some have achieved success by expanding into brick-and-mortar operations. For instance, consultants who primarily work online also conduct regular in-person workshops, and certain psychologists and life coaches initially provide online consultancy before progressing to establish physical clinics (Derichs et al. 2023).

In this manner, online networking serves as a springboard to enhance the participation of women in the traditional marketplace. While operating an online business presents its challenges, it proves to be a viable option for entrepreneurs seeking a starting point. With a touch of creativity and effort, an online start-up can successfully transition to an offline presence. Some groups organise regular business events such as exhibitions and temporary markets, offering participants the opportunity to showcase their products and connect with potential buyers for the future. An admin from a middle-class neighbourhood's social media network transformed her online Facebook page into a brick-and-mortar shop, stocking items from home-based entrepreneurs. Her Facebook and WhatsApp groups served as stepping stones for establishing her shop, a relatively rare presence in middle-class neighbourhoods, where bazaars are typically dominated by men. In this shop, she provides shelves to her suppliers (mainly women from her network who supply products from home-based businesses) and creates a meeting place for them to connect with buyers and other suppliers. The shop also allows other women customers to meet the vendors (C1, 13 April 2021).

Small businesses thrive on the social media pages, as women can gather essential information about running an online business. Common queries include choosing courier services, banks, and packing materials, as well as guidance on creating a brand, marketing, scaling, registering a business and filing taxes. Some groups collaborate with women empowerment initiatives to provide additional online and on-site workshops. Notably, numerous catering and restaurant

businesses have emerged from these online marketplaces, with Karachi Chefs at Home being a prominent group.

These platforms also provide training sessions curated by local women to address knowledge and skills gaps relevant to entrepreneurs. In some cases, the most requested skills are developed into modules, YouTube videos, images with notes, products and workshops to create accessible knowledge formats.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, they serve as an excellent avenue to connect with other small business owners, fostering learning from shared experiences. The emphasis is on problem-solving and mutual learning.

These online networks typically include members with expertise in management, law, consulting, content writing and marketing. I participated in some of these workshops, including a content writing workshop, where the instructor guided us on working as freelance content writers and creating an online portal to launch our careers and to market products and services. The workshop resulted from a collaboration between two major networks for working women in Pakistan. Fifteen participants, who were small business owners aiming to learn about managing their businesses' social media and internet presence, attended the two-day workshop. Conducted in Urdu, the local language, the instructor provided familiar and relatable examples for the audience. The workshop covered the basics of content creation and copywriting, emphasising for instance the importance of robust, catchy headlines; building trust through risk reversal techniques; and reassuring customers by offering a money-back guarantee. Practical details included using short, crisp bullet points, considering an average screen time of consumers being eight hours already. What made the workshop accessible was the facilitator's relatability as a Pakistani Muslim woman.

During the workshop, when the *adhan* (call to prayer) from the mosque was heard, there was a silent pause. The facilitator also reminded the audience about the religious and moral aspects of media marketing, stating, "Since marketing is focused on eliciting an emotional response from the audience, one must also be aware of the ethical implications of one's marketing campaigns" (Freelance Copywriters Workshop facilitator, 23 November 2024). Her advice differed from a preacher's sermon by discussing the issue cautiously without linking it to implications for the afterlife. Instead, she invoked the idea of moral responsibility and cautioned against abusing the power of words and media marketing.

Religious knowledge and shared values possess the potential to connect and empower, even if many groups refrain from explicit discussions of religion. One admin shared that, given the diverse schools of thought within Islam among member women, the admins and moderators must exert extra effort to prevent

11 Cf. Karachi Chefs at Home (<https://www.karachichefsathome.com>; accessed 17 December 2021); Parenting and Relationship Coaching Pakistan (<https://prcpakistan.com>; accessed 17 December 2021); interview with a travel community admin (C7, 3 August 2021).

conflicts arising from differing religious ideologies. While multiple interpretations of Islamic texts can occasionally lead to fruitful debates, they may also generate unpleasant discussions. Consequently, moderators actively edit and filter posts that have the potential to spark conflict (A1, 14 September 2021).

## Networking on social media

Networking is essential for businesses, with network members needing to acquaint themselves with peers and relatable role models (Lewis 2013). Particularly for women, having a role model becomes essential in the context of pre-existing male-dominated markets and trade unions. Gbadegeshin et al. (2021) have identified that online social support proves an effective coping strategy for women in periods of unemployment. For many female Pakistani expats in the Middle East and Europe, social media serves as an alternative marketplace, enabling professionally trained individuals, such as doctors, lawyers and entrepreneurs, to connect and share knowledge, especially in contexts like the Gulf, Europe and North America, where local licensing or working conditions may present challenges. In the cases they studied, Ali et al. (2017) emphasise the importance for network members to familiarise themselves with their peers and find relatable role models. Online connectivity has provided these entrepreneurs with new opportunities to start and grow businesses. Through connections with networks of vendors, suppliers, consumers, trainers, collaborators and human resources, entrepreneurs gain access to essential resources.

One of the Facebook groups examined in this study focused on the topic of investments. Women employed in various sectors learned how to invest their savings, empowering themselves by connecting with other women and gaining insights into halal investment options. Additionally, these women engaged in affordable complementary advertising campaigns for each other, marking a positive step forward. Similar outcomes were documented in earlier studies.<sup>12</sup>

In recent years, Pakistan has witnessed a gradual increase in women assuming leadership roles in both public and private spheres. Despite this progress, women encounter significant challenges in securing capital for entrepreneurial ventures. As women are typically not expected to be the primary financial providers for their families, they often do not have access to inherited capital. This lack of access to capital perpetuates a vicious cycle, compelling many women to earn initial capital through employment and rely on limited savings. Additionally, challenges in mobility often contribute to increased transportation

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Camacho / Barrios 2021, Constantinidis 2011, Delacroix et al. 2019, Jose 2018, Sajjad et al. 2021, Genç / Öksüz 2015.

costs for women, who prefer safer options like Uber, which are generally more expensive than public transport.

However, social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram offer an inexpensive solution by enabling these women to sell their products online (Wally / Koshy 2014). This shift to online retail allows retailers to reach a broader audience, thereby boosting sales. Yet, it is important to note that these platforms might remain inaccessible to some women due to limited internet access. Particularly online retailers from rural areas grapple with additional expenses for shipping and handling, and encounter more hurdles at every step due to infrastructure limitations. The associated postage charges may elevate their costs, potentially discouraging customers due to perceived high prices.

To face these common challenges, online communities provide support by exchanging knowledge and best practices gained from their members' experiences as entrepreneurs and home-based business owners. Archer et al. (2021) discovered that many women prefer to share their stories in women-only groups, as sometimes posing questions in mixed groups can attract unnecessary attention and spam from male members. Studies by Crittenden et al. (2019), Gazit and Amichai-Hamburger (2021) and Graff et al. (2018) also reveal promising positive outcomes in research on other women's support groups on Facebook, including those addressing shared problems. These findings note that although online networking is not exclusive to professional women, and similar groups exist with mixed or predominantly male membership, still, a significant number of women prefer to share their experiences in women-only groups.

Griet Steel (2017) argues that the absence of pre-existing support networks requires women to build these structures from the ground up. Creating such networks is a daunting task, given their essential role in the success of any business venture. In Pakistan, while women's chambers of commerce exist in major cities, their presence falls far short of meeting the widespread need and demand. NGOs and development agencies may offer temporary relief, but they often provide solutions that are insufficient for addressing permanent problems. Moreover, initiatives based on funding often divert time and energy towards convincing donors rather than addressing the actual tasks at hand, a sentiment echoed by Masooda Bano (2012) and Julia Huang (2020). One respondent in my study left her position at an NGO to establish a girls' school in her village with limited resources. She found it difficult to manage the interrupted flow of funds and constantly tailor the project to meet the donors' demands rather than addressing immediate challenges.

Online community groups may face challenges in addressing problems due to a lack of initial investment. However, their strength lies in their awareness and knowledge about local resources and connections, which compensates for the financial constraints. The process remains uninterrupted, as it does not rely on a donor. Connecting with peers and the community enables these groups



to expand their clientele and customer base. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, networking and organising as a group become the only way for them to negotiate, exert influence and professionalise.

## Conclusion

Networks of recognition and trust form the foundation of the professionalisation process. While women's representation in business networks within the traditional bazaar setting in Pakistan is not apparent, online networks present a promising presence. These networks empower women to realise their aspirations by fostering skills growth, disseminating knowledge, challenging societal taboos and restrictive norms, and drawing on religion and tradition for empowering narratives. In social media groups, the shared values and aspirations of educated Muslim women take centre stage, addressing their concerns prominently. These online spaces provide a women-only public platform to collaborate, negotiate values, challenge cultural taboos and support each other's growth. The existing marketplace and its networking bodies, like the chamber of commerce, are dominated by men and elite-class women, leaving a gap that online activities fill for female professionals who may not be able to access these official bodies. The online medium has proven successful for women to establish entrepreneurial hubs, providing essential training, encouragement and networking opportunities to help them kick-start their businesses or careers.

While I did not focus on estimating their actual market share, it is acknowledged that a majority of these women work within the informal economy (Khan 2020). Through sustained encouragement, marketing, training, networking and exhibition opportunities, these online groups create a space for women to professionalise without sacrificing aspects of their lives at home. The groups embrace and welcome the shared experiences of motherhood and care roles, encompassing women in various professional roles such as entrepreneurs, doctors, lawyers, psychologists, coaches, consultants, real estate managers, investors and finance and management experts.

A noteworthy observation across these platforms is the blurred boundary between paid and unpaid work. Women frequently share insights into their care roles, motherhood and parenting responsibilities on these platforms. Since motherhood and care obligations significantly influence their career choices, and a many work from home or part-time, the delineation between paid and unpaid work becomes blurred on these platforms, mirroring their everyday reality. In contrast to men's or mixed groups where a clear segregation exists between work and family, women's professional activities are closely interwoven with their family concerns in these platforms. This interconnectedness is crucial,

as the family-related responsibilities of professionals, along with their other obligations, remain invisible to employers, clients and customers. The mainstream professional world is dominated by the idiom of numbers and disregards the details of personal problems. It tends to place the blame on individuals, labelling them as problematic, needy or unprofessional. In contrast, women's groups prioritise parenting as a central concern. This emphasis on parenting has also led many women to become writers of culturally relevant children and youth literature. Some have initiated projects related to home-schooling, schools and kindergartens. Additionally, many offer courses in Islamic studies tailored to be accessible and engaging for children and youth.

These online networks highlight the gaps that individuals try to fill through their online engagement. Notable figures in this realm include Kanwal Ahmed of Soul Sisters Pakistan (SSP) and Nadia Gangjee of Sheops, both well-known community leaders from Pakistan. SSP focuses on awareness campaigns about the challenges women encounter due to toxic cultural norms and taboo topics. The platform provides a space to connect with legal support, shelters and, most importantly, facilitates the renegotiation of cultural taboos and norms. On the other hand, Sheops stands out as a pioneer among groups focused on skills development for entrepreneurs. It organises numerous online and on-site workshops and training sessions, in addition to establishing a strong support network for its members. The Women's Investment Forum caters to the needs of women who want to learn about halal investments and investments in general. For expat communities, shared challenges include the absence of institutions for performing rituals related to birth, marriage and funerals. These communities also serve as educational hubs for teaching their children about Islam in minority situations.

Professional women strategically use their social capital, knowledge and expertise through online networking, and become sources of strength for one another in the face of shared challenges. United by common religious and cultural values, these support groups serve as incubators, nurturing their members' careers and giving rise to innovative business ideas. In doing so, these groups provide the tools and recognition required for the professionalisation of their members.

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## Appendix 1: Surveyed social media groups and similar groups

Group's name	Facebook address
101 Incredible Women CEOs of Pakistan	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/groups/1722093284630211">https://www.facebook.com/groups/1722093284630211</a>
Fix Her Crown!	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/groups/251272499380139">https://www.facebook.com/groups/251272499380139</a>
The Diet 66 Group (Ladies Only) / Weight Loss with Healthy Eating	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/groups/192991048440574/about">https://www.facebook.com/groups/192991048440574/about</a>
Femprow	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/femprow">https://www.facebook.com/femprow</a>
WOWPK	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/wowpkcommunity">https://www.facebook.com/wowpkcommunity</a>
Superwomen of Pakistan	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/groups/1749890415075295">https://www.facebook.com/groups/1749890415075295</a>
Women Entrepreneurs in Pakistan	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/groups/1706200606200279">https://www.facebook.com/groups/1706200606200279</a>
Pakistan Working Women	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/groups/1527660380805648">https://www.facebook.com/groups/1527660380805648</a>
Soul Sisters Pakistan	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/groups/414865225284415">https://www.facebook.com/groups/414865225284415</a>
The Youth Clubbers (Sisters Only)	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/groups/384575858239392">https://www.facebook.com/groups/384575858239392</a>
Hamari Saltanat	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/groups/2065160023793073">https://www.facebook.com/groups/2065160023793073</a>
Let's Grow Together / Community of Women Entrepreneurs	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/groups/1711302759184416">https://www.facebook.com/groups/1711302759184416</a>
Karachi Chefs at Home	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/groups/karachichefsathome">https://www.facebook.com/groups/karachichefsathome</a>
Pakistani Chefs at Home	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/groups/pakistanichefsathome">https://www.facebook.com/groups/pakistanichefsathome</a>