



Forging Ahead with Passion and Spousal Support

Entrepreneur, Safia Mustafa

This case was written by Professor Amanda Bullough and her graduate student, Aynsley Dunham, at the University of Delaware. It is intended to be used as the basis of class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a management situation. The case was compiled from published sources and interviews with the business leader.

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Abstract

Safia Mustafa is a woman entrepreneur in Pakistan. She owns and operates Eskillstech, a company specializing in marketing through social media, website, and graphic design. Pakistani cultural norms typically restrict women to maintaining the home and caring for children, and women rarely participate in the workforce. This case reviews how Safia was challenged by, and overcame, these cultural norms while forging her career. It also presents a spouse's role in an entrepreneur's pursuit of business goals and the importance of an entrepreneur's passion for her business.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case study, the students should be able to:

- Understand how life and social expectations in a culture like Pakistan influence a woman's entrepreneurial choices.
- Recognize the power of spousal support for women entrepreneurs in a culture like Pakistan's.
- Learn about and identify an entrepreneurial passion and its relevance to entrepreneurial activity.

The Leadership Challenge

Safia Mustafa has just hung up the phone after speaking to a young woman who has just started her own business. She called to invite Safia to tea. She is facing challenges growing her new business and wants to learn from Safia's mentorship. Safia is flattered and has advised young entrepreneurs before, but this phone call has got her reflecting on her own professional story and entrepreneurial journey. What will she say to this young woman? Is she the best role model? She has been successful and proud of her business, so she knows she shouldn't doubt herself. She will certainly share with this woman over their cups of tea how hard it has been to overcome the challenges that have arisen from what society expects of women. Especially difficult has been the ostracizing and negative pressure placed on her and her husband from his family. He has been wonderful throughout this journey. Women face much backlash when they want to do something like start a business, and so do their family members, especially the husbands and fathers who are seen as the head-of-household. Colleagues, friends, neighbors, and family members have made judgmental comments and given suspicious and disapproving looks to her husband. Nevertheless, he stood by her, encouraged, and helped her, and she persisted. Should she tell this young woman about her passion for her business and her determination to do the work needed? Would that be helpful? She will think about this more on her way home this evening and then sleep on it. She's sure that she will have a clearer sense of what mentorship she can offer in the morning.



Safia's Story

Safia Mustafa is a Pakistani woman and entrepreneur with a graphic design and website design career. A freelancer before founding her own business in 2008, Safia has built herself a successful career over the past fifteen years. Safia's success is impressive: Her company was newly founded when the worldwide recession of 2009 destabilized the economy, and she managed to successfully guide the company through this crisis. However, it is even more impressive when one considers the cultural norms that Safia contends with to have a career.

Pakistan's traditional cultural norms have distinct expectations for men and women, which relegate them to different societal realms. The expectation for women is that they perform domestic tasks and stay within the home. A major reason for this is the belief that a woman's actions reflect the respectability of her family and that she must avoid doing something seen as dishonorable. It is seen as highly dishonorable for a woman to interact with men unrelated to her, which is avoided by keeping women in the home (Tabassum, 2016). This has resulted in male-dominated public spaces that are often hostile to women, with less than half of Pakistani women feeling safe outside of their homes due to violence and sexual harassment (Quresh, 2019).

This has also created a situation wherein men are expected to work outside the home and have careers while women stay home. Women are ten times more involved in chores, childcare, and elder care than men, and only 26% of Pakistan's workforce is female. This means that Pakistan's workforce has one of the lowest female participation rates in the world. As women are expected to tend to domestic tasks instead of building careers, their education is often not a priority; half of the Pakistani women have not attended school, and only 10% have post-secondary education. As a result, most work available to women is unskilled or low-skilled in the informal sector and is often performed from home. Additionally, less than 1% of Pakistani entrepreneurs are female (Quresh, 2019).

Safia has certainly contended with these cultural issues throughout her life. However, despite these challenges, she has built a strong career and a successful business. An important part of this was her access to education and the support of her family in pursuing her goals.

Becoming a Graphic Designer

Safia had never planned on going into graphic design or becoming an entrepreneur. With her parents' support, she went to college and earned a graphic and web design diploma. She worked an internship in college that turned into a paid job with the same company. The idea of making a career out of her skills was not something she considered until years later, when her husband noticed her aptitude. Safia and her husband, a publisher, married a few years after



she graduated college. When he saw that she enjoyed graphic design and was skilled in it, he encouraged her to pursue a career. With his support, Safia earned a diploma in graphic design and began working on freelance projects from their home in 2005. She later went on to secure entrepreneurship training in 2014.¹

Over the next three years, Safia advertised her services online and slowly grew her customer base. She also met other designers with whom she wanted to work. With a reliable flow of business and a network of other designers, Safia felt it was time to move her career forward. In November 2008, she founded Eskillstech.

Eskillstech is a graphic design firm with Safia as the primary designer. Eskillstech provides services for national and international clients (e.g., restaurants, cinemas, manufacturing companies) who approach her company for branding, website and social media management, and IOS and Android apps. She hires designers on a project basis, with the average project lasting six to twelve months. Most of the company's work came through the website E-lance (now named Upwork), a platform where freelancers maintain a profile advertising their services and rates so potential customers can hire the best fit for their project. This model significantly reduces overhead costs since she does not need a physical office and is not paying employees' salaries regularly. It also allowed her great flexibility regarding work location and team compositions for project completion.

Despite these advantages, Safia has plans to expand into a physical space one day. Her greatest hope for Eskillstech is to use the company to help others. Ideally, Safia wants to provide other graphic designers with a place where they can develop their careers and utilize their talents to the fullest. When that day comes, she plans to hire a full-time team to work with her year-round.

Social Difficulties

Unfortunately, Safia has faced social backlash for her graphic design and entrepreneurial work. Although her parents and her husband are fully supportive of her, her husband's parents are not. Safia's in-laws spoke out against her pursuit of graphic design education, her freelance work, and her work as the CEO of Eskillstech. They want her to be a more traditional wife for their son, who does not interact with men who are not family relatives, and a woman who stays at home to raise their family. They have continuously pressured her husband to stop supporting her career, hoping that he will assert authority over her and convince her to shut down her

¹ WomenX: Multiplying the Power of Women Entrepreneurs in Pakistan. Retrieved October 2020: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2018/11/01/womenx-multiplying-the-power-of-women-entrepreneurs-in-pakistan>



business. Nonetheless, he remains supportive of Safia's career and has refused to follow his parents' wishes.

In addition to problems with her relatives, Safia has faced issues with clients and potential clients. When Safia tried to obtain local clients in Pakistan, many often doubted her abilities in graphic design. They felt that as a woman, she would not be as capable of performing the work as a man would. Additionally, many believed she would fail to provide the work as promised because she could not balance her career while managing her home and family. In short, Safia's gender held her back because of the cultural expectations for women in Pakistan. Fortunately, Safia has not had this issue with foreign clients, who are most of her client base and do not share Pakistani cultural expectations for women.

Safia's Work Today

As of August 2020, Eskillstech is still operating under Safia's leadership. Safia continues to promote the company on Elance (now named Upwork) to obtain contracts. (Eskillstech, Upwork profile, n.d.) Eskillstech is also active on multiple social media platforms, including LinkedIn and Facebook, through which interested parties can contact Safia. ("Eskillstech," Facebook profile, n.d. & "Eskillstech," LinkedIn profile, n.d.)



References

Eskillstech Facebook Profile <https://www.facebook.com/eskillstech/>

Eskillstech LinkedIn Profile <https://www.linkedin.com/in/eskillstech/>

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