



# Overcoming Sexism and Economic Setbacks

**Entrepreneur, Naumeena Suhail**

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**

Naumeena Suhail is an entrepreneur and single mother in Karachi, Pakistan, who owns and operates The Design Firm, a marketing and social media/website design company serving banks and other companies in Pakistan and abroad. This case focuses on the struggles Naumeena has faced while conducting business in Pakistan, particularly those caused by economic challenges and sexism.

## **Learning Outcomes**

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

- Appreciate external economic shocks outside an entrepreneur's control.
- Explore strategies for business survival during a recession.
- Understand sexism and sexual harassment and their consequences for female entrepreneurs.
- Learn strategies for combatting sexism and sexual harassment in the workplace.

## **Background**

Naumeena Suhail is a Pakistani woman, a single mother of two children, and a successful entrepreneur. Naumeena owns and operates a successful business in Pakistan: The Design Firm ("TDF"). She founded TDF in 2002 as an interactive and creative design house, a "360-degree solutions powerhouse." TDF uses Naumeena's degrees in higher education, an Associate's degree in Computer Science, and a Bachelor's of Science in Mathematics, Statistics, and Economics and expands on her entrepreneurship training.<sup>1</sup>

Naumeena has built a career for herself, although it has been challenging. She has had to grapple with challenges along the way, including sexism and sexual harassment and a global recession and its aftermath. However, she has succeeded despite the forces working against her through hard work, intellect, and perseverance. She also credits the never-ending support of her family and friends for her growth, some of whom she developed throughout her professional journey.

## **The Design Firm**

Naumeena lived in America from 1995 to 1997 while earning her associate degree and began doing graphic coding design work there. She returned to Pakistan with her degree and

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<sup>1</sup>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>



continued working for another two years before she married, at which point she quit her job to be a stay-at-home wife (later divorced). Despite not actively participating in the paid workforce, she was approached by companies she had worked for previously (IT company working primarily for banks), who were impressed by her skills and wanted her to work with them on a contract basis. Naumeena accepted these offers, and after several years of success with doing freelance coding designing work on a per-project basis for these clients, she opened TDF in 2002.

With TDF, Naumeena wanted to solve as many problems as possible for her clients. Using her skills and the skills of the new team of developers and designers she built as a business leader, she began offering services such as branding, event management, website design, website applications and user portals, and ATM and other machine interfaces. Her company does work far beyond just marketing, and for this reason, she branded the company as a solutions powerhouse. TDF had 25 employees besides Naumeena and her business partner in its early years. She also acquired an office she rented in a central-Karachi business district and occasionally worked from her home office.

TDF has been in business for two decades. In that time, they have executed more than 800 projects for more than 90 domestic clients and 30 international clients in the following areas: Finance & Banking, Technology, Logistics, Energy Sector, Retail, Industrial, Real Estate, Health, Organization, and Payment Systems. And they are still growing. They provide web solutions, mobile applications, software development, digital marketing, domain hosting, and creative services like branding and events materials and video and content development. They have served small and multinational clients like Shahzad Eye Hospital, Habib Metropolitan Bank, So-Safe Pakistan, Swisstex Chemical, IBM, the World Bank, Dubai Islamic Bank, and countless others.

Although TDF did well, running it was not without challenges for Naumeena. Despite her background in mathematics and economics, she struggled to figure out how business finances worked. It took her time to discover the best way to manage her cash flow, an appropriate payment model for her business, and how to charge a fair price for her work without driving customers away. She had to learn to market TDF with the advanced skills they offered, as she otherwise risked being undercut by cheaper competitors who often offered weaker services or had less experience.

Also, as is common for most start-ups, these challenges were particularly difficult in the early years for TDF. Many Pakistani companies did not yet see a need for their website or online presence and therefore felt her services were unnecessary. However, society began to shift, and as online presence became more important, companies began to see the value in Naumeena's skills and experience and in TDF as a vender.



In addition to learning financial strategies and building a reputation and client base for her nascent business, Naumeena has had the added challenge of dealing with rampant sexism as a female business owner. Women are not typically a large part of Pakistan's workforce, and the world of paid work is, therefore, often unfriendly to them. Business relationships and larger deals are often discussed in the evenings after work, in more social than business settings, with men since women are less common in these business roles. This limited Naumeena's networking opportunities because she needed to be home for her children and women, risking losing respect and tarnishing their reputations when engaging in activities like this with men unrelated to them.

To solve this problem, Naumeena made time for networking in her daytime work schedule by setting socially-oriented business meetings for breakfast or lunch during business hours and when she did not have to worry about childcare. This did not solve all her problems with networking, though. She still contended with amorous advances from men as she tried to network professionally. While most men recognized her skills and took her seriously as a businesswoman, others tried to use their business relationship to pressure her into inappropriate, non-business relations. Fortunately, Naumeena found that firmly rejecting their advances and staying focused on business usually convinced these men to stop flirting, and she has successfully conducted business this way. These behaviors are still frustrating and disrespectful, requiring Naumeena to have thick skin to ignore and work around these annoyances and the downright dangers of sexual harassment.

In addition, to all of these business and culture challenges, the company was not immune to external shocks to the financial system. TDF was deeply affected by the global recession that began in 2008. The companies she worked with stopped spending on branding or marketing, which greatly reduced her income. Some companies could not pay her or could only pay small installments over a period of months. Unfortunately, this dramatic loss of income was not accompanied by a natural reduction in expenses, so she was forced to make drastic changes to save the company. Naumeena closed her physical office to remove the overhead cost of paying for the building, which helped significantly. She then had to fire all her employees, although she continued to employ some of them as contractors on an as-needed basis. She continued working from her home office until her finances improved enough to establish a physical space for TDF again.

Naumeena learned a lot from the economic crash, which she now applies to TDF. She became more efficient and frugal. In 2015, she rented a smaller and less lavish office than before for her team outside of the business center, which greatly reduced the rent cost. Second, she has a much smaller full-time team now, continuing to primarily work with freelance workers to fulfill client requests on a per-contract basis. This helps to save additional costs because she is no longer paying full salaries to a large team. Finally, Naumeena changed the way she collects payments from her clients. While she used to be flexible with when she received down



payments or late payments, she now requires advanced payment before work is started to ensure she is at least partially compensated for any work she completes. Overall, she has better learned to control costs and keep cash flows stable, which, when combined with her understanding of how to network, has allowed TDF to bounce back and become stronger than before.

## References

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The Design Firm. (n.d.) Retrieved July 2020 from <https://thedesignsfirm.com/>