



Coming out of hardship, with the support of a female role model, Saima found the courage to launch a business. On her terms.

Saima Jameel Khawaja

Pakistan

For Saima Jameel Khawaja from Lahore, Pakistan, her journey through personal hardships and a strong relationship with her aunt shaped her confidence, pushed her to launch her brand, and led her to take ownership of business decisions.



My successful business has grown my confidence. When your love, passion, and confidence are included in making the product, your customers will be happy.

The challenge

Following a difficult marriage, subsequent divorce, and left to raise her son alone, Saima faced a crucial turning point. In this moment, she turned to her beloved late aunt, Nafees Mazhar, who had always been a cornerstone of strength. “My aunt, who passed away recently, was more significant to me

than my mother. I got confidence from her. She was my ideal. Her love and faith inspired me. When I felt overwhelmed, she was the one who said, ‘If you want the world to pity you, then keep crying... If you wish to succeed, you must stand up for yourself, work hard, and prove your worth to the world.’”

Saima explains how she learned everything from Nafees, including essential skills and training, which made her realize her own capabilities. “When I realized I had learned a lot, my husband tried to undermine that.” To dampen her growing confidence, Saima’s husband moved her and her son overseas. After one year, facing increasingly bad conditions in her home, Saima took her son back to Pakistan. “Women cannot be confined or (cloaked) controlled. Each woman has her own individuality and unique identity, and I am no exception.”

Returning to Pakistan without her husband and with a child to support, Saima faced countless uncertainties, so once again turned to her aunt for guidance. Nafees sold a piece of her land to provide Saima with the funding to launch her business, and her

wisdom and support ignited Saima’s entrepreneurial spark, confirming a belief that she was capable of forging her own path, and rebuilding her life through her brand, [Saima Zee](#).

Having previously gained a degree in fashion and textiles, she set out to create products that would stand apart from what was already available in the market. “I had to work in such a way that I had to introduce a new thing to a high-income market,” she shares. *Saima Zee* distinguishes itself through its unique combination of traditional techniques and contemporary styles. “We print special designs featuring our exclusive work, unavailable elsewhere, and favored by our high-income clients,” Saima shares. With a focus on handmade work, her creations include mirror work, kamdani (traditional metal embroidery), and thread embroidery, elements she reintroduces with modern flair. “All of these items are old, but we are presenting them with a new approach,” she explains, highlighting the way she has revitalized traditional crafts.



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Taking ownership through renewed confidence

When Saima entered her first exhibition, her confidence was put to the test. Despite being a newcomer, she remained resolute in the face of skepticism from older, more established designers. “The seniors asked me, ‘Saima, are you crazy? You charge so much. Do you think you can have higher prices than us?’” she recalls. Undeterred by their doubt, Saima stuck to her belief in the quality of her work, maintaining her pricing and positioning strategy. “I believed in my strength. I did it.” The decision to persist – rooted in the support from her aunt and a clear vision – paid off. Her first exhibition was a resounding success, surprising many who had initially doubted her approach. “Everybody was surprised. Asking, Saima, how did you do it?” For Saima, the answer was simple: belief in herself and in the value of her work.

As an entrepreneur with 18 staff, 16 of whom are women, Saima makes all the decisions for her business on her own. She grounds her leadership and decision-making style in a desire to do something different. “I run my

business on my own, making all product and financial decisions myself. While I thankfully have family support, I believe a true businessperson handles things on their own without relying on others.” Over the years, her entrepreneurial journey has reinforced the importance of confidence in autonomous decision-making. “My belief, my sincerity, that is my talent,” she says, pointing to how her faith in her abilities has helped her build a successful brand.

Saima’s leadership extends beyond her own business to the people she works with. Through CARE, Saima participated in a program that highlighted soft skills, such as customer interaction and communication, as essential components of leadership. “The indirect approach to leadership is your confidence, your customer interaction, your gentle demeanor while dealing with customers,” she reflected, adding that these qualities are crucial for any leader in business, “They explained to me that once you bring your product to market, you become the face of the brand and are selling yourself as well.”

Her confidence in her decision-making has also allowed her to take on a mentorship role within her company – a role modelled by her aunt – strengthening her nearly all female team and sharing knowledge with other women. Saima provides

digital skills training to her employees, encouraging them to engage with the modern marketplace. “I have given training to my workers in the digital skills I know, including Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube.”



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Next steps

Today, Saima's journey is far from over. She has big plans for the future, with aspirations of entering the international market and hosting her own exhibitions abroad. Her confidence remains unwavering, growing alongside her business: "When I reach the international market, my confidence will increase even more." For Saima, the success of *Saima Zee* is just the beginning.

Strive Women, led by [CARE](#) and supported by the [Mastercard Center for Inclusive Growth](#), supports women entrepreneurs in Pakistan, Peru and Vietnam, to grow their businesses through access to the networks, skills, and finances that build confidence and support decision-making.



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