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PAKISTAN

SUCCESS STORY

Changing Tides

A USAID program helps break the stigma of female entrepreneurship in Pakistan



With her two daughters looking on, Amna Ahmed jars tangy pickles.

“It is his faith in me that lets me take center stage,” said Amna Ahmed of her husband and business partner. “We have worked together to make this business a success.”

Telling Our Story
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Ifikhtar Ahmed is the marketing manager of I.A. Khan Enterprises, a home-based business that produces local delicacies like tangy pickles and sohan halwa, a popular dessert, in Multan, a central Punjabi city of four million. And while Ahmed’s position as a manager would be considered normal by even the most traditional in Pakistan, what makes his role unusual is that the company’s managing director is his wife, Amna.

In this socially conservative country, few women venture into the mainstream workforce and contribute to the country’s economic growth. Most Pakistani husbands will not entertain the idea of ceding authority to make decisions, business or otherwise, to their wives. Ahmed is among an emerging number of men who recognize the potential of women to contribute to generating household income and improving the country’s economy.

“It is his faith in me that lets me take center stage,” Amna said. “We have worked together to make this business a success.” Indeed, the enterprise has grown from modest beginnings to one of Multan’s leading producers of local delicacies, which they exhibit at national trade fairs and expositions.

USAID encourages husbands to support their wives in producing and marketing products – often ones made in family settings for generations – as these enterprises represent a huge untapped economic resource in Pakistan. One program developed in partnership with the Multan-based South Punjab Women Chambers of Commerce and Industry created a Spousal Appreciation Program, a unique social forum that directly challenges conservative notions of women’s confinement to the household. The program acknowledges that women in Pakistan have the capability to run successful enterprises but require the encouragement and support of their male family members. The project publicly appreciates positive examples of supportive husbands to help inspire more men to encourage their wives to become entrepreneurs.

At one such recent event in Multan, the Ahmeds were among 10 couples lauded for being role models for female-run entrepreneurship within the business community. The program has received extensive media coverage and is setting precedents that promise to diminish the stigma associated with women-led businesses.

“This initiative is inspiring other men to follow our example,” Ahmed said at the event.

The theme of gender-inclusiveness and equality cuts across all USAID programs. The Spousal Appreciation Program is just one among a host of initiatives across Pakistan that will cultivate an enabling environment for women, and encourage them to become an active part of the country’s economic mainstream.