

## Setting New Boundaries

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I was raised in a family where working women were rare. However, with my family's encouragement, I chose commerce at a time when medicine was considered the first-choice profession for women. Even my father initially was skeptical of my entrance into a man-dominated profession. However, his pride on my achievement as the first woman chartered accountant of the Zuberi family, has been a hallmark memory for me.

As one of the very few women in the CA profession, during my four years professional training at Ford Rhodes Robson Morrow, I felt like I had to consistently work extra hard to offer my best performance in the fear of losing opportunities. After nearly a decade of working and excelling in my career, I resigned as the Executive Vice President in First Women Bank in 2004. One of the main reasons was the pressure of 'balancing' both professional and domestic responsibilities at that time.

I obtained a practicing license and continued freelancing at a time when work from home was a rare phenomenon. Later, I joined hands with a few like-minded women and founded the first all-women-led CA practicing firm in Pakistan under the name Usmani & Co. Chartered Accountants (UCO).

In my experience, many women with brilliant entrepreneurial abilities are unable to sustain businesses for long due to lack of financial know-how. Part of our work includes equipping them with the relevant skillset that can encourage them to explore alternative opportunities thereby giving them greater control over the terms of their work.

A huge barrier women face in working are pressing family commitments. In my firm, I introduced the concept of working from home way back in 2013. This is in

line with my belief that a workplace policy should equip women at work with facilities that ease the social burden of their gender.

These kind of initiatives not only uplift women who have been excluded from the workforce, but also provide support to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Before COVID, these words were alien, inefficient and unattainable. Now, the world is relying and functioning entirely on this.

I have also been bestowed with the honour of being elected as the first woman Council Member at ICAP, with unanimous support of all members in 2017, and in 2019, was elected as the first woman Vice President (VP). This was a very challenging role and required high-stake decision-making and multiple responsibilities.

Currently, my professional focus is on two aspects: first, to promote women's participation in our professional sphere, and second, to work for the uplift of the small and medium practices (SMPs) to support SMEs in Pakistan. I believe the two are interlinked and policy interventions that combine the interests of both can facilitate the empowerment of women. My recent selection as technical advisor in The International Federation of Accountants (IFAC) Small and Medium Practices (SMP) Advisory Group, would help in achieving the desired objectives.

To achieve career advancement, women should be technically strong, digitally transformed, and possess the required skillset essential to climb-up the ladder. However, the corporate sector needs to ensure the provision of basic facilities such as day-care centers, adequate maternity leaves, flexible working hours, equal pay, and equal growth opportunities, trusting the capabilities and importance of women in leadership roles.

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